Lot 166

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Lot 166

by HigherMagic

Summary

Mutant trade is a legal activity. Hannibal has never been inclined to buy one for himself, but then Jack asks him to attend a Verger auction to acquire a special asset for the FBI. What he gets is Will, one of Mason's 'Special Projects'. Whether Will can be useful to the FBI remains to be seen, but now Hannibal legally owns a mutant slave, and things promise to get very...messy.

Notes

So you know how I had an 11 hour drive and nothing to do but keep myself awake? This happened.

Despite the inherent Master/Slave consent issues, I want people to know that the Hannigram, when it happens, will be 100% consensual on both sides.

Chapter 1

"Doctor Lecter, thank you so much for coming to see me on such short notice."

"It's no problem, Agent Crawford," Hannibal replies, leaning in to shake Jack's hand before taking a seat across from him at his desk. He unbuttons his suit jacket and folds one leg over the other, lacing his fingers together as he settles in his seat. "How can I help you?"

"I called you as a reference from Ms. Du Maurier. As I'm given to understand, you have a professional friendship with the Vergers."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side, eyebrows rising. He taps his fingertips against his opposite palm. "That is correct," he replies with a nod. "I've known the family for many years."

"Are you familiar with their auctions?"

Hannibal pauses, regarding Jack coolly. The man meets his gaze steadily, waiting for Hannibal to respond. "Yes," he replies after another moment. "Since Molson Verger's death, I have gone to their auctions as a guest." He pauses. "I have never been a buyer, if that's what this is about."

Jack raises a hand. "Nothing like that, Doctor Lecter," he says, and smiles. Hannibal smiles back. Since, technically, purchasing the kinds of things the Vergers sell is not technically illegal, Hannibal knows he will suffer no investigation or scrutiny, but it's a controversial subject. "I called you here because we have been given information that this weekend's auction will have a particular asset. One that the FBI is very interested in acquiring."

Hannibal nods, humming. "May I ask the nature of this asset?"

"Right now, we only know it as 'Lot 166'." Jack reaches into the top drawer of his desk and pulls out a slim manila folder, and hands it to Hannibal, who leans forward and takes it. "But the Director has been on my ass about this and I was hoping you might be able to lend some insight."

"The Vergers deal in a lot of things," Hannibal says mildly. "They sell information, trade deals, weapons…" He opens the folder and falls silent. Inside it is a single sheet of paper, neat typography covering half the page. Hannibal is surprised – he imagined the FBI to keep more detailed notes. "…People."

"Mutants aren't people," Jack says tightly, betraying a bigotry Hannibal finds surprising. He remains silent, looking through the sparse notes. All he can glean from it is that 'Lot 166' is most likely to be of the latter kind.

He closes the folder and meets Jack's eyes. "You want me to find information on this asset?" he asks.

Jack presses his lips together and folds his hands on his desk, leaning forward. "I would like to ask you to buy it," he says.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows again and sets the folder down. "A short-sighed endeavor, Agent Crawford," he says lightly, "given that you don't even know what it is I'll be purchasing for you."

"I'm aware," Jack replies, sitting back. He wipes a hand over his mouth. "And whatever it is, I assure you we will give you all the resources for its care and containment while the Director figures out whether to tell me exactly what he wants with it."

"Agent Crawford, I understand this is a delicate matter, but I simply cannot accept without more information," Hannibal replies, spreading his hands out in an open, helpless gesture. "For all you know, this might be a creature able to kill with a single touch. Or a radioactive weapon. Or not a creature at all, but information to something about which neither of us know anything."

"I know," Jack replies solemnly. "I wouldn't ask this of you if I had another choice. These auctions are invitation-only, Doctor Lecter. I can't exactly send an agent in your stead."

"You are asking me to betray a lifelong friendship, or at least jeopardize it, for the sake of our professional relationship which is barely out of its infancy." He sighs and shakes his head.

"I can assure you, you will be compensated," Jack replies. "I hardly imagine, whatever the asset is, that it will remain in your care for long."

Hannibal considers him for a long moment. He has only ever met Jack once before, at a Behavioral Science conference that he had attended a year prior. He had found the man shrewd, carefully calculating, and reasonable to a point. He is not the kind of man who asks for favors lightly.

"I will do what I can," he finally concedes, and Jack lets out a heavy, relieved breath. He stands and Hannibal follows suit and they shake hands. "I shall let you know as soon as I have the asset."

"Thank you, Doctor Lecter," Jack says. "I really appreciate it."

Hannibal smiles, and leaves the office.

The Verger Auctions are legendary amongst certain circles within the cultural elite. To have an outstanding invitation to one is practically unheard of. Hannibal is the only person who is not directly related to the family that has an open seat at their gatherings. He had treated Mason as a youth, and now sees Margot periodically when her own helplessness drives her into his study for a short psychiatric session where she confesses that she wants to kill her brother and thinks about it daily.

The Verger estate is large and rich. Hannibal drives through the gates, which open as soon as his headlights touch them. At the gate is a single guard, who gives Hannibal a familiar nod of greeting that Hannibal returns. He drives up the long road to the main house and parks his car, handing the keys over to the valet.

A small woman approaches him. She is dressed in medical scrubs, her long hair straight and black and falling to her waist. Her name is Ichi, meaning 'one', and she has five sisters that go up to the number six in Japanese. They are all identical but Ichi is always the one that greets guests when they arrive.

"Doctor Lecter!" she chirps, smiling widely when Hannibal greets her. "Always a pleasure. Please, this way."

He follows her into the grand foyer. The Verger children had inherited their parents' indulgence for fine, frivolous gaudiness. The floors are marble, the staircase winding and the bannisters carved from ivory. There are several guests there already, finely dressed and drinking champagne. As soon as Hannibal enters, San – 'Three' – takes his coat and Ni – 'Two' – offers him a glass.

"Thank you," he says, and she smiles just like her sister and disappears into the crowd. The siblings are mutants, few of many in the Verger estate. They possess the ability to read minds, though it is an inexact science. They are there are guards as well, and their small stature belies a deadly capability with knives and poisons. They prevent unwanted rudeness amongst the guests.

Hannibal spies Margot, and gravitates to her side. She smiles at him, wide-eyed and flushed from alcohol, and lifts her cheek so that he can kiss her in greeting. "Always a pleasure, Doctor Lecter," she says, and takes a sip of her champagne.

Hannibal smiles, noting that the sling on her arm is gone. "You're looking well," he says.

"Yes," she replies, and when she smiles it feels secretive, like they are old friends with an inside joke. "Mason has been busy with the latest acquisitions. Perhaps we will tempt you to finally buy, today."

"Perhaps you will," Hannibal replies lightly, and takes a sip of champagne. It's crisp and refreshing on his tongue and he gives a hum of appreciation. "I confess every time I come, I am more and more tempted. One day you'll break me, I'm sure."

Margot laughs, bubbly and light. "Come see the tickets for today," she says, and holds out a hand. "We'll see if something strikes your fancy."

Hannibal nods, and allows her to lead him over to the tables where the lots are advertised. The bidding room holds six people at a time, and so one must put their name down early with an opening bid if they want a slot. The numbers start from one hundred, and Hannibal goes down the line with an air of careful indifference.

"Creature-heavy, this week," he notes.

Margot nods. "They're growing in popularity," she replies airily. "Especially with our foreign friends."

Where the laws are much more liberal when it comes to the owning and care of slaves. That is how Hannibal regards them, no matter their use. Some people buy mutants for protection and guardianship, others as soldiers, others still as playthings for their own amusement. He finds the entire practice somewhat distasteful – to have ownership of a living, breathing thing, regardless of the debate as to whether these things are human or not, means to have some kind of emotional connection to them. A protectiveness. Hannibal sees nothing in humanity worth protecting most of the time. He looks at people like the Vergers look at pigs: a means to an end, a way to sate hungers that would seem unrefined to others.

He approaches the ticket for lot 166, and pauses. There is a brief description and Hannibal hums when he sees he was right in thinking it was a creature that has captured the FBI's attention. Highly volatile, prone to fits of rage and aggression, functionally mute, eats raw meat only.

He tilts his head to one side, and wonders what the Director of the FBI might see in such a creature. He puts his name down and Margot lets out a surprised, pleased hum.

"I'm curious," Hannibal explains, and sets the pen down. There are four other names ahead of him. He arrived just in time, it seems. He puts his name down on others with the same description for appearances' sake.

Margot smiles. "I know your type, Doctor Lecter," she says quietly. "You like the ones who want to do harm, but can't."

Hannibal smiles.

"Bidders for lot 133, please follow me to the auction chamber."

Hannibal lifts his head and excuses himself from the conversation, following Ichi down a long hallway with five others to the auction chamber. It is a circular room with six doors, and outside each one of the siblings stands. Ichi gestures for Hannibal to enter the third door, smiling when he does. The innards of the room are plain, a single comfortable chair and a table on which to set drinks and food. The walls are black and there is a single large pane of glass that allows the bidder to view the items inside. Hannibal knows that the glass is a one-way mirror, so he cannot see anyone else, and they cannot see him.

The room within lights up, and Hannibal takes a seat as the floor opens and the creature that is lot 133 is displayed.

"Lot 133 is a seventeen-year-old female. In good health, tested and vaccinated against all known diseases." Ichi's voice echoes over a speakerphone in each room, and Hannibal hums,

lifting his head as a platform is raised, revealing the teenager. She's dressed in plain clothing, a t-shirt and shorts. She's pale, and her hair is long and dark.

She raises her eyes, tear-filled and afraid, and looks around the room. "Although unthreatening in appearance, physical tests have shown that she possesses superior speed and strength." The girl whimpers, digging her nails into the floor of the room, and pushes herself to her feet. "We will start the bid at half a million."

A light goes on near Hannibal, one room adjacent to him. "Thank you, friend. Do I hear six hundred?" Ichi says. Another light goes on, across from Hannibal. "Seven?"

The girl shrieks, putting her head in her hands, and falls to her knees again. She slams a fist down on the floor and Hannibal sits up straighter when he feels the ground under him shake. Three other lights go on at once. "Eight hundred? Nine?"

One light remains.

"One million?"

No one bids higher. Hannibal sits back, contemplating the girl as she trembles and starts to cry. She doesn't make a sound, and then the floor opens and she sinks back down and the room goes dim. "Sold for nine hundred thousand. Thank you, friend."

The door opens behind him and Hannibal stands, smiling at Ni as she gestures for him to return to the main hall.

"Not your taste?" Margot asks mildly when he rejoins her.

Hannibal hums. "I don't think I have room for a child in my life," he says, and Margot smiles. "And I certainly have no need for a soldier."

She hums. "Yes," she replies, taking a sip of her glass. "I imagine you are perfectly capable of defending yourself."

Hannibal smiles. More lots are placed, and men and women come and go. The crowd starts to dwindle as they near the sixties. Guests are asked not to make more than one purchase at a time, for transportation purposes.

"Bidders for lot 166, please follow me to the auction chamber."

"Excuse me," Hannibal says again, and Margot smiles and nods, and Hannibal follows San down to the chamber again. He takes his seat and settles down, strangely excited at finally seeing this asset for himself.

The lights go on in the center room and the floor opens. For a moment, nothing happens, and Hannibal sits forward.

Then, the platform rises, and Hannibal stands so that he can get a better look.

The creature is heavily chained, iron links around his wrists, his neck, and over his back to keep him in place. There's a mask over his face, clear plastic that shows scruff on his cheeks and pink lips. He's…lovely, his body bare except for a plain pair of underwear around his hips to preserve modesty. His shoulders are strong and bruised, his thighs thick, he's slim enough that Hannibal can see the sharp juts of his ribs and hipbones, and the square cut of his jaw within the mask.

He lifts his head, and Hannibal can see that he's been drugged. His eyes are glazed and heavy-lidded, and he's breathing raggedly, his back heaving in sharp, ragged breaths.

"Lot 166 is a volatile acquisition," Ichi says over the speakerphone. "He's been tested and vaccinated against all known diseases. During captivity he has killed three of his caretakers and injured one beyond repair."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side.

"We believe he would be best suited to a fighting ring or similar environment. He understands English and American Sign Language, but has yet to speak during training and testing at the Verger estate. Please be warned, friends, this acquisition will take a very firm and steady hand to train."

The man lifts his head, blinking slowly and gasping. The chains clink.

"We will start the bidding at two hundred thousand dollars."

A light goes on near Hannibal, and then several things happen at once.

The lights flicker in the room, the man lifts his head and bares his teeth, and then he pushes himself to his feet and throws himself against the windowpane where the light had come on. The chains strain against his weight, and Hannibal knows that if he hadn't been drugged he might have been able to snap them completely.

He slams his fist against the glass and claws at it, snarling loudly. His nails shriek and cut the glass.

Hannibal smiles, and presses the button his own room that will cause his own light to go off.

"Three hundred. Thank you, friend."

The man pauses, his attention caught by the new light. He lifts his head and sniffs the air, jaws parted behind the mask. His shoulders and chest heave and when he turns towards Hannibal, Hannibal can see that his chest is similarly bruised and marked like he's been beaten to within an inch of his life. Despite that, he stands strong, and lunges for the glass separating him and Hannibal.

Hannibal steps closer to it, folding his hands behind him, and tilts his head to one side. The glass won't break, he's sure of that.

The man's eyes are a beautiful, icy blue, fiercely glowing with rage. His teeth, bared as they are, are sharp at the canines, meant to rip and tear flesh apart from living bone. His hair is

thick and dark, curling around his face. He looks like some kind of avenging angel, the kinds of things God sent down to lay waste to Sodom and Gomorrah.

He snarls, and his eyes are directly on Hannibal's like he can see him through the glass. He flattens his hands on the glass, fingers curling, and takes another deep inhale.

Hannibal meets his gaze, tilts his head to one side, and smiles. He thinks he might see the man's lips twitch in answer.

"Going once. Going twice. Sold. Thank you, friend."

Then, the chains suddenly go taut and haul the creature back to the center of the room. He snarls, clawing at them, the metal giving an unholy shriek under his nails. He tries to bite at them but he can't behind the mask, and then the lights go dim and the floor opens.

Ichi opens Hannibal's door and smiles at him. "This way, please, Doctor Lecter," she says, and leads Hannibal away from the foyer to the buyer's room. This is the part that Hannibal is unfamiliar with, although he knows from what Margot has told him what is about to happen.

He makes his payment and then is led to where they keep lot 166 caged. He's in a cell made of stone, a single clear wall providing sight lines and air to him. Hannibal pauses when he sees the man get dragged in, sedated and heavy, and deposited back into the room. The people who are carrying him wear heavy metal suits and Hannibal suspects that this is something they only do for this particular asset.

"Your arm, please," Ichi says, and Hannibal holds his wrist out to her. She has a stamp on her hand and stamps his wrist, marking him as a buyer for the night, and he smiles and lowers his arm again. "With this purchase you will be given a containment unit, sedation medication, and this."

She hands him what looks like a dog whistle. Hannibal raises his eyebrows and takes it. "We have trained him to expect pain when he hears the sound," she says. "Only he can hear it – it triggers a submission and flight reflex in him that will render him calm. You'll also be allowed to take his mask, and his collar. We recommend you fortify whatever holding cell you can."

"Thank you," he murmurs.

Ichi smiles, and turns to her sisters, Roku – 'Six' – and Go – 'Five'. She barks out a swift command in Japanese and they leave Hannibal and Ichi, entering the containment cell with the same caretakers and lifting the unconscious man out of the cell for transportation.

"Does he have a name?" Hannibal asks.

"We call him Will."

Hannibal turns, and greets Mason Verger with a cordial smile and nod. Margot is at his side, her face impassive. Mason grins widely, pulling Hannibal into an overly-friendly, off-center

hug. "He's a willful little thing," Mason says, and laughs at his own joke. "I knew we'd get you one of these days, Doctor Lecter!"

"I humbly accept that you were right," Hannibal replies, smiling. "Perhaps you will make a regular buyer of me."

"Hah! Let's see how you handle my pet, first," Mason says, and Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "He was, ah, my personal project for a while," Mason adds, licking his lips with an overly-salacious way. "I liked to wind him up and just…" He mimics a wind-up toy, then spreads his fingers with a small explosion sound. "Watch him go!"

"I'm more and more intrigued with every word," Hannibal replies mildly. He knows what kind of unfortunate things Mason likes to do with his 'pets'. It makes his skin crawl and he imagines cutting Mason's face up and feeding it to dogs.

Ichi clears her throat, her eyes dark and knowing when Hannibal looks at her. She smiles, secretive and amused, and says nothing.

Mason laughs again and claps Hannibal on the back. "Good luck with him, my friend!" he says. "I hope he doesn't eat you for dinner. Come, Margot!"

Mason leaves, Margot following behind like she's been led on a leash.

Ichi hums. "Where will we be taking your purchase, Doctor Lecter?" she asks, the pinnacle of professionalism.

Hannibal smiles. "My study," he says. "I'll lead the way."

The large truck follows Hannibal to his study, and stops behind his car when Hannibal parks. He gets out and goes back to the truck. There is a container sitting on the back of it and inside is Will's cage. Two men get out of the truck and open it. Will flinches when the light hits his eyes, growling instinctively and curled up at the back of it.

One of the men takes out a blow dart, and Hannibal watches with raised eyebrows as he shoots the dart into Will's thigh. Will's eyelids droop almost immediately, and when he goes lax, the men open the cage and haul him out. He still has a thick iron collar around his neck and they carry Will into Hannibal's study and hand him the key.

One of the men looks around and hums. "Don't think this place'll contain him very well, Sir," he says.

Hannibal smiles. "I shoulder full responsibility," he says. "Goodnight, gentlemen."

"If he does escape, call Mister Verger and he'll send a collection unit. He's chipped, so we'll find him," one of the men adds, and Hannibal nods and sees them out. He locks the door behind him and turns when he hears Will growl softly.

They had deposited him on Hannibal's couch, and Hannibal hums, taking a seat behind his desk and pulling his appointment book towards him. Below it is a new notebook, the kinds he keeps for his patients, and he opens it and begins to write inside;

Will. Mid-thirties. Three known kills. Enhanced canines and fits of extreme aggression.

He feels eyes on him, and raises his gaze to see Will looking at him. He's breathing heavily, like he can wipe away the sedative's effects with more oxygen. The mask on his face is steaming and the collar looks very heavy and tight.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, and looks back down at his notes. "Did they deserve it?" he asks. He looks back up to see Will blink blearily at him. "The men you killed. The other you maimed. I assume they deserved it."

After all, if Margot is any indication, it's not surprising that being under Mason's select care made Will aggressive and violent. Hannibal himself has felt the urge to do harm to Mason Verger out of more than just hunger: out of spite.

Will growls, baring his teeth, and Hannibal smiles.

"I can assure you no harm will come to you under my care," Hannibal continues lightly. Ichi had said Will understands English. Just because he doesn't speak doesn't mean he doesn't understand. "I will not hurt you, and in return you will not attempt to attack or kill me."

He closes his book and folds his fingers together, resting his elbows on the desk. "Sound fair?"

Will lets out another sound, less of a growl and more of a rumble in his chest. Hannibal hums, his eyes falling to the collar once again. He stands and approaches Will, and Will bares his teeth, shifting his weight like he's trying to escape but can't bring his muscles to move.

Hannibal takes the collar key out of his pocket and holds it up for Will to see. "Relax," he says, and Will looks at the key with a keen, nervous understanding. Hannibal reaches out and Will flinches, but can't move far, and Hannibal puts a hand in his hair to keep him still. He tilts Will's head forward, revealing the back of the collar, and puts the key in the padlock. He twists it and the lock opens, and Hannibal lets Will go so that he can undo the halves of the collar and pull it off.

Will's neck is red and chafed where the collar was, and when it's removed, he breathes deeply like it was preventing him doing so. "There we go," Hannibal says, smiling, and Will looks up at him, silent, assessing. It feels like a wildcat measuring lunging distance. "Would you like me to take the mask off as well?"

Will lifts a hand to his face, his fingers shaking. They curl against the plastic, his claws scratching it and, up close, Hannibal can see where he's clearly tried to do this before. Will swallows harshly, and nods. Hannibal takes him by the hair and makes him lean forward again so that he can undo the straps. They're complicated things, clearly too much for Will to try on his own in his sedated state.

He undoes the straps and gently takes the mask from Will's face, setting it next to the collar. Will's jaws part and he breathes in deeply through his mouth, his face a picture of relief. His eyes close and he stretches his jaw out, wincing in pain, and then opens his eyes and lifts his head again.

He looks incredibly young, Hannibal thinks, as Will licks his lips and rakes his eyes up and down Hannibal. There's an innocence to him that contradicts his aggression in its entirety. Hannibal wonders how much of it was caused simply by being made under Mason's terrible hands.

Hannibal reaches forward, and Will flinches again, baring his teeth, but Hannibal keeps going until he can touch Will's jaw. He smooths his fingers along Will's cheeks, rubbing at the sore joint, under his soft throat. Will lets out another rumble, shoulders tensed.

Hannibal lets go and Will shoves himself to his feet, growling, and lunges for Hannibal. Hannibal catches him, uncoordinated and sedated as he is, and turns him around, one hand tight on Will's wrist and yanking his arm up behind his back to threaten dislocating his shoulder, the other hand tight in Will's hair and forcing his head back so his neck is exposed.

"Now, Will, don't be rude," he says mildly. Will gasps, trembling in his hold, his eyes wide and focused on the ceiling. "I want to be kind to you, but if you want to behave like a wild animal, that is how I will treat you."

Will whines, swallowing again, teeth bared. "Nod if you understand me," Hannibal says, and Will nods, once, jaw clenched.

Hannibal lets him go and steps away, going back to his desk. Will collapses back onto the couch, shivering and curled up like a stray in the rain. Hannibal opens his notebook again and takes his pen, and goes to one of the two chairs he normally sits in during a session.

He looks over to Will and sees Will regarding him, wide-eyed and unsure. He smiles, and Will's lips twitch like he's trying to mimic but can't figure out how.

"Now that that's out of the way," Hannibal says, folding one leg over the other and setting his open notebook on his lap. Will shoves himself semi-upright, curled up with his feet tucked and one arm around his shins. "How long have you been with the Vergers?"

Will winces, gritting his teeth, and looks away. He swallows and holds up three fingers. "Three days?" Will shakes his head. "Months? Years?"

Will nods, and Hannibal makes a note of that. Three years with Mason Verger is enough to drive any man mad.

"Do you have any special abilities, aside from your strength, claws, and teeth?"

Will swallows. He nods. Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Care to share?"

Will curls up even tighter, letting out a low rumble. Hannibal sighs. "Can you speak?"

Will shakes his head. He taps his fingers against his chafed throat and then mimics a knife going across them, and shakes his head again. "Mason Verger cut your neck, so you can't talk?" Hannibal asks. Will nods. "And you survived that." Will nods again. "So can I assume you can heal yourself?"

Will shrugs one shoulder and lets out a hum. If he can heal, Mason must have removed his voice box completely to render him mute. But the bruises and marks on his chest indicate he doesn't heal all the time. Or maybe Mason harmed him differently, in a way that lingers.

Hannibal is having a hard time understanding what would compel the FBI to seek him out. He is an interesting specimen, but so far Hannibal is having trouble gleaning his specific use.

"It said on your ticket that you only eat raw meat," Hannibal says, and Will nods. "Is that a preference, or can you only digest that?"

Will winces, and nods. He puts a hand on his stomach and then spreads his hand up from his mouth, mimicking throwing up. He shakes his head again. "I see," Hannibal murmurs. Well, at least that need is relatively easy to satisfy. "Do you have a preference as to what kind of meat?"

Will's eyes flash to his. They're greener now in the light of Hannibal's study. He presses his lips together and looks Hannibal up and down. Then, he smiles. It's a soft and sheepish thing, and he clicks his nails against his teeth in a gesture that Hannibal recognizes as being one of Margot's tics, and points to Hannibal.

Man. Cannibal. He smiles.

"Well, I'm sure we can accommodate that," he says. Will blinks at him and cocks his head to one side. "It'll have to be our little secret, though."

Will huffs, and lifts his shoulders, and it feels like he's saying 'Who would I tell?'. Hannibal's smile widens.

"Where did you live before the Vergers?"

Will presses his lips together and shrugs, shaking his head. He taps his fingers against his skull and then flattens his palm out. Hannibal recognizes that gesture, at least.

I don't know.

Memory loss. Or suppression. Interesting. Hannibal wonders if Jack or the Director know more. "Who taught you sign language?"

Will smiles, affectionate, and lifts a finger. One. Ichi. Then two. Ni. Up to six. "I shall have to learn, then," Hannibal notes, and Will blinks at him again and doesn't make a sound. "You will remain here until I have set up adequate room for you in my home. It shouldn't take long, and as long as you stick to our agreement and are not rude, I see no reason why we cannot come to a harmonious companionship."

Will smiles. He touches his fingers to his mouth and then forward to Hannibal. Hannibal knows it means 'Thank you'. Then he makes another gesture, and Hannibal frowns. He doesn't recognize it.

He stands and holds Will his notebook and Will takes it and his pen. He flips to a new page and writes out words in an unsteady scrawl. Like that of a child.

What is your name?

Hannibal smiles when he reads it. "My name is Doctor Hannibal Lecter," he says, and Will licks his lips and nods. "And it's a pleasure to meet you, Will."

Chapter 2

The sleeves of Hannibal's shirt end over Will's knuckles. His clothes are almost comically large on Will, but until Hannibal manages to go shopping and make accommodations for his new companion, they will have to do. Will wears one of his dark red button-downs, the collar splayed out wide to reveal the pink marks on his neck and the beginnings of the bruises on his chest, and a pair of Hannibal's slacks covers his legs and bunches up under his socked feet. The whole disheveled appearance makes him look sweet and young, like a child playing in his father's closet.

Hannibal brings him the kidneys and liver he had been planning to cook and eat that weekend, and Will devours them entirely, as neat as he can be, but there are flecks of blood on his sleeves and caked under his nails as he sucks his fingers clean.

Hannibal smiles and pets through his hair, making Will hum. He takes away the plastic packaging and sets it back inside the cooler. "I shall make sure there's always a fresh store for you," he says. Will looks up at him, eyes pretty and wide, and he makes the 'Thank you' gesture again. His fingers shine in the light coming from Hannibal's desk lamp. The sky is dark outside, and the shadows within his study are intimate observers.

Hannibal moves away from Will, allowing him to curl up on Hannibal's couch again, and takes a seat with his notebook on his lap. Within the few hours between when he first acquired Will, he has already managed to fill several pages with his notes. "Now," he says, and settles into place.

Will hums, blinking slowly. There's an arc of a streetlight coming in from the window and he shifts his weight so that it sits across his neck, which already looks much better than the chafed, raw patch of skin it had been before.

Hannibal smiles at him. "How much sleep do you require?" he asks. Will's mouth twitches and he shrugs one shoulder. Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Do you sleep at all?"

Will presses his lips together, huffing through his nose. He straightens up and reaches out for Hannibal's pen and notebook, and Hannibal gives it to him. Will flips to the back of the notebook, holding the pen and book tightly in his white-knuckled hands, and writes;

Yes. But I don't have to.

Hannibal looks at the scrawl, and hums in consideration. "When you sleep, do you dream?"

Will nods, his breathing unsteady.

"What do you dream about?"

Will swallows, and closes the book over the pen, pushing it back into Hannibal's hands. He shoves himself into the couch and curls up and shakes his head vehemently. Hannibal watches him do it, curious at the reaction. He does not reach out to soothe.

Then, Will goes still, and lifts his head, his eyes wide and fixed on the door. A split-second later, there is a soft knock, and Hannibal stands.

Will lets out a quiet noise, and Hannibal isn't sure how it's meant to sound. He can't imagine Will feels anything like fear, given what he is and what he can do. Hannibal goes to the door and opens it, smiling when Ichi and San greet him with matching grins.

Behind the women is Mason, and Hannibal steps back to allow them all inside. Margot follows after, her eyes wide and her lips pressed into a thin line. She gives Hannibal a nod of greeting and Ichi and San stand a few feet apart from each other, framing Mason like two roaring lions carved into the armrests of a throne.

Mason lets out a low whistle, his hands on his hips as he looks around Hannibal's study. "My, my, it has been a *long* time since I've been here," he says. He clucks his tongue at the side of his mouth and does a slow pivot. Margot seems tense, her eyes wide and flashing between Hannibal and her brother.

Will has gone utterly still, like Mason's vision is based off movement and if he doesn't make a sound, doesn't breathe, doesn't blink, Mason won't see him. Then Mason stops, facing forward again, and he smiles when he sees Will.

He barks out a laugh and claps Hannibal on the shoulder. "Good to see he didn't make you into dinner!" he crows.

"Yes, unfortunately his resale value remains undecided," Hannibal replies smoothly. He's sure if Will had succeeded in attacking and killing him, Mason would have had no trouble putting him up for the next auction to increase his profit. Three hundred thousand, though not a small sum, is almost paltry compared to the price of the Vergers' other ticket items.

Mason grins, toothy and cheerful. "Well, I just wanted to come by and thank you for your patronage, old friend. And make sure Will wasn't casting us in an…unfriendly light." His eyes go back to Will, raking over him slowly, and Will lowers his eyes and sets them on the ground, swallowing harshly enough that Hannibal hears his throat click.

"I'm sure he shan't disappoint," Hannibal replies, starting to get irritated at Mason's continued presence. The hour is late and he wants to continue to study Will as much as he can, before he is obligated to call Jack. "I will be sure to reach out if I need anything else."

Mason's eyes flash, and his smile tilts up at the corners into something malicious and smug. Hannibal knows what he's thinking, that he believes Hannibal intends to treat Will with the same sadistic touch Mason did. "I'll leave you to it, Doctor Lecter," he says, and then he turns and strides out of the room. Ichi and San follow behind, leaving Margot.

Her eyes are bright and she presses her lips together, approaching Hannibal and placing a gentle hand on his arm. "If you need anything," she says, "call me, not Mason."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, and then his attention is drawn by the sound of a quiet, soft purr. He turns his head and Will is standing, his shoulders hunched to protect his neck

but his face open. He walks towards Margot slowly, careful not to startle her, and she smiles at him.

"Doctor Lecter is a good friend of mine," she says to him. Will blinks at her, biting his lower lip. "We can trust him."

The way she says it sounds like a challenge. Will nods, and ducks his head into her free hand when she lifts it and cups his cheek for a brief moment. Hannibal smiles when she straightens up. He can hear Mason calling for her, impatient and shrill, and she sighs again, plasters on a small, fake smile, and leaves the study.

Hannibal closes the door behind them and turns to regard Will. Will meets his gaze steadily, his head low but his eyes unblinking behind his dark lashes. He bites his lower lip and shakes his hands out at his sides, Hannibal's cuffs falling to hide his fingers.

Hannibal smiles, something like affection touching him at the sight. "We shall have to get you some proper clothes," he says.

Will huffs, licking his lips, and shakes his head. Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "Would you rather wear mine?" he asks.

Will shrugs one shoulder, then takes Hannibal's notebook and opens one of the back pages. He scribbles on it and hands it to Hannibal.

Don't give me anything you don't want ruined.

Hannibal considers the words, then raises his eyes to meet Will's. Will sighs and slumps back on the couch, and starts picking between his teeth with his nails, humming quietly.

Hannibal sits back down. He is starting to get tired, but is loathe to part with Will or cease his study of him before all his questions are answered. After all, there's no guarantee that after Jack meets him, he will remain in Hannibal's care.

He swallows and ignores the stab of possessive anger that flickers in his hindbrain at the thought.

"How often do you need to eat?" he asks.

Will huffs, licking his lips. He shrugs one shoulder and lifts one hand, fingers pinched together to leave a small space between them. "Three meals a day?" Hannibal says, and Will smiles tightly and closes the gap a little more. "Come now, Will, don't be shy. I have no intention of starving you."

Will regards him for a long, silent moment. Hannibal is so used to those he treats in this room babbling on incessantly, desperate to fill the air with words so that their heads can become quiet. Even Margot, quiet and beaten as she is, talks a lot when the doors shut. Sitting in the silence with Will is refreshing.

Hannibal is used to observing in relative quiet. He prods and guides his patients with as few words as possible, hoping that they might come to their own conclusions. Therapy is most

effective, he knows, when the subject is not simply told how to think, but guided into understanding why and how they think for themselves. It gives them free will, or as much free will as Hannibal allows them to have. Will is the most captive creature that has ever sat with him, and yet he is the most free at the same time. He has been robbed of his voice, so all he has are his thoughts.

Will scratches at his neck and huffs again, a small smile gracing his lovely face. It's wide enough to show his fangs. Hannibal nods to them. "Have you always had those?" he asks. "And your claws?"

Will nods, running his tongue across his teeth before he swallows. Hannibal hums, and tears a sheet of paper out from the back of his notebook and hands it to Will, with a pen. "I want you to describe in detail all of your abilities," he says.

Will takes the piece of paper and pen, fingers curling tightly around both. He looks hesitant, and Hannibal sighs and closes his notebook. "I have a confession to make, Will," he says, and Will tilts his head to one side. "Do you know much of the outside world? Things like Government, and the police?"

Will nods, pressing his lips together.

"My purchase of you was no accident. I have a friend who works for the FBI, and he was tasked by his superior to acquire you, because the FBI believes that you would be a useful asset to them." Will tilts his head to one side and Hannibal smiles. "I believe they intend to offer you something in the way of gainful employment."

Will makes a quiet, distressed sound, scribbling something on his paper before he hands it to Hannibal.

I won't stay with you?

"If you want to, of course you may," Hannibal replies. "But you must understand – at some point this friend of mine will be expecting me to notify him that I have you in my care. He will want to meet you, and understand what his superior desires you for. For that, I need to know what you can do." He smiles. "So far I have seen much more than I expected, but nothing particularly…useful."

Will lets out a quiet whimper and scribbles down another note.

I want to be useful. Please don't send me away.

Hannibal's smile widens. "I have no intention of doing so," he replies. "I simply wish to understand who and what you are. Are you willing to share that with me?"

Will nods. He bites his lower lip, looking down at what remains of the sheet. Then, he heaves in a breath, and starts to write.

Jack picks up the phone on the third ring. "Agent Crawford," he says. His voice is tired, gruff.

"Hello, Jack," Hannibal greets. "I apologize for the late hour, but I wanted to inform you that I had acquired lot 166."

Jack hums. Hannibal hears sheets rustling, like he's sitting up in bed. "And?" he asks.

"He is a peculiar creature. He possesses certain physical modifications. I believe Mason Verger intended to make him into a fighting animal."

Jack makes another noise, frustrated and low. Not exactly something he expected to hear, Hannibal is sure.

"He possesses other abilities, as well," Hannibal says, looking down at the messy paragraph Will had written out for him. "I am uncertain what the Director might want to use him for, but I can assure you he is fairly calm of mind, and intelligent. Whatever tasks are assigned to him, I am confident he will be able to complete them."

"You have him in your home?"

"My study," Hannibal replies, lifting his gaze to meet Will's eyes. Will seems jittery, shifting his weight and plucking nervously at the button holes in Hannibal's shirt cuffs. "I will be keeping him here until I can make more permanent arrangements for him."

"I will stop by first thing in the morning," Jack says.

"Excellent," Hannibal replies. "Oh, and bring someone who is fluent in A.S.L."

Jack pauses. "Sign language?" he asks.

"Yes," Hannibal says. "Will is functionally mute. He can't talk, but he can communicate in sign language. I've been having him write things down for me, but I believe the conversation would go smoother if we had someone who could translate for him."

"…Alright," Jack replies, sounding tired and more aggravated. Hannibal is sure this is turning into a wicked thorn in his paw. "I'll stop by your office in the morning. Thank you, Doctor Lecter."

"Have a good night, Agent Crawford," Hannibal replies, and hangs up. Will makes a quiet, anxious noise, and Hannibal smiles at him. "He will be visiting us in the morning," Hannibal says, pocketing his phone and going back to his chair. "We will, of course, be keeping your diet and your explosive performance at the auction a secret, for now."

Will's cheeks turn pink and he ducks his head. He almost looks ashamed.

"Will," Hannibal says, and Will looks up again. Hannibal crosses to him and takes his face in his hands, smoothing his hair from his forehead. "Do not be ashamed of how you had to behave under Mason's care to survive. I will not hold that against you. But Jack, and others, may need some coaxing."

Will's eyes are wide, a lovely icy-blue again. He doesn't make a sound, but curls his fingers around Hannibal's wrists, gentle and warm. He nods, pressing his lips together, and Hannibal smiles and lets him go.

"Now, you may not need to sleep, but unfortunately I do. Will you be alright here on your own?"

Will nods, looking around as though searching for a secret door, or a hiding place. Hannibal lets him do it. He takes Will's piece of paper and tears off the bottom edge, writing down his cell phone number.

"If you need me for anything, call me here," he says, and gestures to the desk phone. "When I answer, tap the receiver three times, so I know it's you, and I will come."

Will smiles, taking the piece of paper. He stands and, after a moment of hesitation, puts his hand on Hannibal's chest. He pauses, meeting Hannibal's eyes, and Hannibal can see he's trying to say something with them – a plea for trust and mercy. Will ducks his head and pushes his forehead against Hannibal's collarbone, and Hannibal understands why. Will wanted to make sure Hannibal knew he wasn't going to attack him before he touched him.

Will nuzzles his suit pocket, breathing deep, and then pulls back to make the 'Thank you' sign again. Hannibal smiles, threads a hand through his hair, and pulls Will in to kiss his forehead. He's not sure why he does it, but with the spark of pleasure he feels when Will lets out a shocked gasp, a purr of happiness, he decides it doesn't much matter.

Will doesn't call him. The next morning, Hannibal brings him a set of lungs and Will eats them almost whole, slurping at the organ juice and swallowing the meat like a snake with its kill. Hannibal goes to his desk while they wait for Jack to arrive, transferring Will's notes into his own writing.

Longest time without sleep: 91 hours.

Known kills: ~~3 men and 1 maimed.~~ 14 creatures, 3 men, 1 maimed.

Abilities: Mimicry, Empathy, Shapeshifting.

He finishes making his notes, swallowing back a huff of frustration when he realizes that he's no closer to deducing what possible use the FBI might have for Will than he was at the start. Unless they intend to use him as an undercover agent, which seems far-fetched, in his opinion. The FBI have no shortage of agents they can put out in the field, and employment of a mutant, should it be discovered while undercover, could have drastic consequences.

Will stands and walks over to him, still dressed in the set of clothes Hannibal gave him yesterday. Hannibal lifts his eyes and sees that Will is holding his mask and collar.

He bites he lower lip and hands them to Hannibal, who takes them. Will's eyes are dark, tight at the corners, and he turns and sweeps his hair to one side to bare the back of his neck, and kneels down facing away from Hannibal as though waiting for Hannibal to put him back into them.

Hannibal cocks his head to one side, his fingers curling around the thick metal and plastic. "Why are you doing this, Will?" he asks.

Will turns his head and breathes out slowly. His fingers twitch, but he doesn't reach for his pen and paper. He faces forward again and bows his head and doesn't move. Hannibal sighs, and shifts forward in his chair so that he can loop the collar around Will's neck. He pulls it tight, swallowing when he sees it digging into his pale neck, and feeds the padlock through the holes at the back and locks it.

Then, he takes the mask. He slides a hand over Will's forehead, through his hair, and tilts his head back until Will's shoulders sit heavy between his thighs. Will swallows, gasping, his eyes tilted up, and Hannibal gently fits the mask over his jaw and face. He tightens the straps until it won't slip off, but won't dig in either.

Then, he lets Will go, a strange combination of troubled and satisfied when Will remains still and quiet between his legs. Will tilts his head and nuzzles Hannibal's knee, the plastic of the mask cool and hard against his leg, and then Will stands and goes back to the couch.

Then, there is a knock on the door, and Hannibal wonders if he should have added 'Foresight' to the list of Will's abilities.

It's Jack. At his side is a woman with sharp eyes and an expression of barely-contained eagerness. He recognizes her. Hannibal greets them with a nod and steps back to allow them inside.

"Doctor Lecter, I believe you know Doctor Bloom."

"Yes," Hannibal replies. Alana Bloom had been a student of his for some time, and since then she has become a leader in her own field of mutant psychology. She is also, Hannibal knows, fluent in sign language.

"Alana, always a pleasure," Hannibal says, shaking her hand. He takes her and Jack's coats and hangs them up and gestures for them to take their seats. Jack sits in Hannibal's chair, Alana in the one usually reserved for patients. Lacking anywhere else to sit, Hannibal takes a spot on the end of his couch, a comfortable but protective distance from Will, who has gone back to being curled up against the side of it, his feet tucked and his hands wrapped tight to his stomach.

Hannibal looks over at him and smiles. Will smiles back, eyes heavy-lidded and cheeks pink behind his mask. "And this is Will."

Jack's dark eyes land on Will, assessing, his eyebrows rising as he takes in Will's appearance and attire. "Why the mask and collar?" he asks.

"Will was labeled a volatile asset," Hannibal says before Will can respond. Will's eyes flash and he lets out a low hum, curling up tighter. "I was advised to keep him muzzled until he is domesticated."

The words feel bitter on his tongue, speaking about Will as though he is little better than a feral dog. But it is language that Jack understands, and Hannibal must adhere to his prejudices for now.

Alana raises an eyebrow. "He seems nonthreatening enough," she says archly, disapproval in her tone. Hannibal smiles at her.

"You didn't see him at the auction," he says. "Will might be the most dangerous creature in this room, even now."

"You seem awfully comfortable sitting so close to him, then," Jack notes.

Hannibal nods. "Will and I have come to an agreement regarding that," he says, and looks to Will again. Will hums, smiling, and nods as well. "Well." He spreads his hands out in an open gesture. "Since we possess all the means to reasonably communicate, I encourage you to ask your questions, Agent Crawford. Perhaps we can figure out what has the FBI so keenly interested in him."

"Yes," Jack says, straightening and taking his pocketbook out of his jacket, along with a click pen. He opens the book and sets it on his thigh, ready to take notes. "I called the Director before coming to you. Apparently, now that lot 166 is in custody, the powers that be are willing to shed more light on the subject. According to our sources, Will here…" He raises his eyes and meets Will's steady gaze, "possesses skills and abilities that would make him a strong asset in the hunt and capture of serial killers."

Will hums, and Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "…I see," he says, and looks over at Will. Will is smiling, his eyes on Jack's neck. He licks his lips and Hannibal smiles. "How might that work, exactly?"

"I was hoping he could tell me," Jack replies.

Will's smile widens, and he straightens up, his feet on the floor, and pushes Hannibal's shirt sleeves up so that his hands are free. They move, creating signs fluidly, and Hannibal finds himself enthralled as he watches Will speak;

"My master gave me the ability to walk into a room and immediately create a story of whatever happened inside it," Alana says as Will signs. "I tell stories."

"Stories," Jack repeats. "So…you make things up?"

Will huffs, his eyes bright with glee, and he shakes his head. "I read the room," Alana says as Will's hands move again. Hannibal does his best to follow, wanting to learn what each sign means so that he can communicate with Will without help as soon as possible. "And I can recreate the events, to a point. Depending on the situation, I can enter someone's mind and read their thoughts, their motivations, and sometimes I can -."

He stops, swallowing hard, his fingers twitching. He looks at Hannibal and Hannibal gives him an encouraging nod.

"Speak freely, Will," he says. "You have nothing to fear, here."

Will presses his lips together, bows his head, and nods. "If the body is fresh enough, I can bring it back to life," he signs, and Alana says. She lets out a shocked gasp. "I can see what they saw, hear what they heard, in their final moments."

He stops, and Alana breathes out shakily, looking to Jack. Jack regards her with a raised eyebrow and she shrugs. "That's what he said," she says, and shakes her head.

And if that is the case, Hannibal thinks it's suddenly very obvious what the FBI wants with Will.

Will straightens up, signing again; "I want to be useful to you," Alana says for him.

Jack smiles, calculating and shrewd. "Well, I'm happy to hear that," he says. "With your permission, Doctor Lecter, I have something I'd like Will to see."

Hannibal blinks. "Right now?" he asks.

"Yes," Jack says. "There have been a string of reports of missing young girls, and we have very little in the way of leads. Another girl is missing, abducted from another Minnesota campus. That's a pattern, Doctor Lecter."

"I know this case," Hannibal says. "There aren't any bodies. Nothing for Will to examine."

Jack holds up a hand. "I don't want him to examine that case, yet," he says, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "First, we'll need a trial run. I need to see what he can do with my own eyes."

Hannibal smiles. "Do you intend to stage a murder?" he asks.

Jack returns it. "Something like that."

Chapter 3

"I'll admit I'm surprised by you, Hannibal. I never thought you were one who was very much interested in the mutant trade."

Hannibal smiles, able to hear Alana's distaste in her curt tone. Hannibal is following Jack's SUV, with Alana in the passenger seat and Will curled up in the back. Will is laid down along the backseat, his eyes closed, almost like he's asleep. But Hannibal knows he's not asleep.

He is ever-vigilant, listening in at all times.

"Jack asked me to do this for him," he replies.

"And you agreed," Alana says, her tone still thinly judgmental. "Forgive me; you never seemed to be one willing to make accommodations for anyone. Even in the name of civic duty."

Hannibal smiles. "Perhaps my age has softened me," he says.

Alana huffs a laugh, her cheeks turning pink. "You're not that much older than I am," she replies quietly.

"You and I have known each other for a long time, Alana," Hannibal says, following Jack as he merges onto the highway and kicks up the speed of the cars. "I'd like to think I have maintained, through our friendship, the appearance of a reasonable man. Do you think I am being unreasonable now?"

"Not unreasonable, no," Alana replies. "Just…out of character. Do you intend to care for Will and provide for him as you would a roommate, or a pet?"

Hannibal presses his lips together, wondering what the alternative might be in her eyes. "I do not like the notion of slavery," he says. "Caring for Will and controlling him are two separate things. I strive to provide the first, not the second."

"I don't think Jack shares your vision, Hannibal."

"Then it would be my duty to shield Will from the likes of men like him," Hannibal replies lightly. "And Mason Verger."

"I've heard about Mason Verger," Alana says softly. She doesn't say any more on the matter, and Hannibal wonders if she's doing the same mental comparison as Hannibal is: both Jack and Mason are men who need to be in control, who delight in it. Jack just likes to take the ethical and moral high ground.

"What is the sign for 'Master'?" Hannibal asks, and Alana looks at him, before she does it. Two closed fists in front of her, slightly shaken, then pushed down flat like running down the edges of a ladder. Hannibal nods. "If you see Will refer to me that way, I ask that you correct

him immediately. The same for any synonym, such as 'Owner' or 'Keeper' or anything like that."

"What should he call you, then?" Alana asks.

Hannibal smiles. "I hope, one day, a friend."

Alana hums, smiling at Hannibal. Her demeanor has softened, now that she realizes Hannibal has no interest in exercising dominion over Will. At least, not as a master and subject, or a slave. "Would you be willing to instruct me in sign language?" Hannibal asks. "I would like to learn as soon as possible."

"Of course," Alana replies. "If, in return, you allow me to study and speak to Will. I'd like to get to know him."

Hannibal smiles at her. "I'd expect nothing less."

"Do you know any at all?" she asks.

Hannibal nods. "I know basic greetings," he says. "'Hello' and 'Goodbye'. I know 'Thank you', and 'I know' and 'Don't know'. I know the letters of the alphabet. Will has managed to communicate somewhat to me through charade, but I'd like to learn the actual signs. The universal ones."

"He has been robbed of connection," Alana says, and Hannibal nods, pleased that she has already noticed this about him. "He's eager to make new ones." She pauses. "I'm happy to hear you're willing to accommodate him, Hannibal. He seems like the kind of person who could use a friend."

"Jack says that mutants aren't people," Hannibal replies lightly, curious what she will say to that.

Her jaw clenches and she hums, pressing her lips together. "Yes, I'm very aware of what Jack thinks."

"I feel compelled to tell you that he is not collared and masked out of my own design," Hannibal says. "He asked me to do it, before you and Jack arrived."

"…Interesting," Alana says, shifting her weight to look over her shoulder at Will. "Had you told him much about Jack?"

"No," Hannibal replies, shaking his head. "He has a keen awareness of what the world sees him as. I believe Mason Verger wanted to make a fighting creature out of him, and as a result, that is all Will has identified as for the time he spent under Mason's care. He also, I suspect, has some kind of premonition. He knew you were coming, before you knocked. Perhaps he knows Jack would have reacted better to the sight of him in some kind of domestication."

"People like seeing pit bulls in muzzles," Alana says softly, straightening in her seat. There's a fierce, protective anger in her eyes. Motherly and strong. She cares deeply about mutant

rights and voices. Hannibal has read more than one paper of hers positing that mutants should be treated as citizens in their own right, as much as any true-born human.

"Will has been in Mason Verger's care for three years," Hannibal says. "Before that time, he tells me he has no memory of his life or himself. I'm hoping to unlock those. I believe it would be beneficial to him to remember the man he was before Mason turned him into a monster."

Alana hums. "I would like to help with that," she says.

Hannibal smiles. "Yes, I thought you might."

The drive takes almost an hour, and then Hannibal pulls up behind Jack outside of what appears to be an active crime scene. It's in a motel, and there's yellow police tape in front of one of the doors to the rooms. There are no analysts, coroners, or any agents that Hannibal can see. He hums in curiosity and turns the car off, stepping out with Alana.

Will straightens up immediately, his eyes bright and clear, a curious rumble in his chest. "Stay here for a moment, Will," Hannibal says, and Will nods. Hannibal rolls down the back window so that he can hear what is being said.

Jack greets them, his breath misting in the cold air. Will has his chin resting on the window edge, like a dog wanting wind in its face, his eyes fixed on Jack as he sighs and pulls out his notebook.

"This was an active crime scene less than two hours ago," he says. "We've already gathered our evidence, and we're waiting for the cleaning crew to arrive. The bodies have been removed, but we have photographs depicting the scene in detail." He looks at Will. "I'm hoping to see what Will makes of it."

Will hums, curling his fingers around the edge of the window. He looks eager, and Hannibal smiles. "Alright," he says, and opens the door. Will climbs out, his socked feet touching the icy ground. Hannibal should have gotten him shoes, but he had been unprepared for Jack to insist they leave right away, and had none to spare.

Will doesn't seem to mind the cold. His breath mists but he doesn't shiver. He licks his lips, rubs at the edge of his mask, and puts his eyes on the yellow tape.

"This way," Jack says, and turns towards the room. Hannibal gestures for Will to walk ahead of him and Will does with a deferential nod, following Jack, Hannibal and Alana bringing up the rear.

Jack lifts the tape and Will, Hannibal, and Alana duck inside. The motel room is fairly large, a queen-sized bed on one wall, a television mounted at an angle so people can watch it from

bed. There is a chair and table in the corner, on it sits a coffee maker and a pot of sugar packets.

There are two large blood stains on the floor, at each corner of the bed.

Will sucks in a breath through his parted jaws, his mask steaming as his body warms up in the musty room. It reeks of blood and vomit, and Hannibal's nose wrinkles as Will steps into the center of the room, between the two blood stains. His eyes are on the sheets.

He turns and looks at Jack, holding out his hand. Jack hands him the file full of photographs and Will opens them, his eyes flashing as he looks over the images.

He takes one and lays it on the bed. Then another, then a third. Then the file is empty, and there are dozens of photographs splayed out, depicting the scene. A man and a woman, their backs skinned and open, revealing their spines. They are naked, kneeling in supplication, heads bowed at each corner of the bed.

Will takes in another deep breath. He kneels on the ground at the end of bed, his shaking hands pressing over each photograph. His fingerprints leave marks on the shiny polaroids. He frowns, and then presses his nose to the sheets, breathing deeply through the mask.

He straightens up, sitting back. His hands move and Alana steps forward to read the signs; "He slept here?"

Jack nods. "The whole night, looks like."

"What was the time of death?"

"Put around ten last night."

Will's eyes flash and he lifts them to Hannibal first, then Jack. "That's fresh enough," Alana says. "Under twenty-four hours. I can read them for you, if you want."

Jack presses his lips together. "Let's start with the room."

Will nods, looking somewhat ashamed, and Hannibal swallows back his protest. Will is eager to be useful, he believes that he will remain in Hannibal's care as long as he is useful. Hannibal wants to reassure him that he has no intention of sending him back to Mason Verger, but he forces himself to remain silent.

Will stands, closing his eyes, his head bowed. When he opens them, he reaches out to Alana, who takes his hand. He nods to the bloodstain where the woman was and gently coaxes her to stand just shy of it. She swallows, clearly uncomfortable with the idea, and he gives her a small, encouraging smile. She comes to a stop and he drops her hand.

Then, he turns to Hannibal, and gestures for him to come over. Hannibal does, taking his place where the skinned man had knelt.

Then, Will gathers the photographs, hands them to Hannibal, and climbs onto the bed. He lays down, his eyes going between Hannibal and Alana, and then he closes them.

His hands rest on his chest, a perfect picture of relaxed sleep. His hands move, slowly. "I smell vomit," Alana murmurs. "What was in it?"

Jack flicks through his notebook. "Toxin report showed Dexamethasone...Kepra..."

Will frowns, and straightens up. "What else?" Alana says.

"Gamma four radiation. Steroids for inflammation. Anticonvulsants for seizures."

Will hums, smiling. "He has a brain tumor," he signs, and Alana says, then Will looks around and climbs off the bed. He goes to Hannibal's side and sighs, reaching out in the same way he did in Hannibal's study. He wants to make sure Hannibal knows he won't be attacked.

Hannibal smiles at him, and nods, and Will runs a hand over his shoulder, down his spine. His nails dig in gently and he rakes them across Hannibal's coat, like he's peeling back pieces of flesh.

He moves away. "This is my gift to you," Alana murmurs. "I make you into Angels. This is not who you are. You are more now than what you were." Will hesitates, fingers curling.

His hands fall, and Hannibal turns to Jack to see his reaction. Jack has his eyebrows raised. "So, what, he's making Angels to pray to him?"

Will shakes his head, smiling. His eyes are heavy-lidded, like he's exhausted. His shoulders slump and his cheeks and neck are red. "He is afraid of dying," he signs, and Alana says. "He does not make Angels to pray *to* him, but *for* him."

"And now I lay me down to sleep," Hannibal murmurs, and Will's eyes go to him.

"He used hooks to elevate their wings," Will signs. "He's a competent fisherman, he knows how to make knots and he's strong enough to subdue both a man and woman by himself. He acted alone." He sighs, and the expression on his face is almost sorrowful. "He is afraid of being alone. Of dying alone. He has a family."

Jack hums. "How do you figure that?"

Will smiles. "No one fears loneliness if they have nothing else to compare it to," he signs. Then, he presses his lips together and ducks his head. "Without reading a live scene, I cannot give you more, here. I can try reading the bodies, if you think it will help."

Jack considers this, closing his book. "Yes," he says. "I will go ahead and make sure they are available. Doctor Lecter, please bring Will by the office at four."

"Of course," Hannibal says, and Alana follows Jack out of the room, seeming relieved to go. Hannibal gestures for Will to follow, and Will hesitates. He reaches out and curls his fingers in Hannibal's coat, forcing them to face each other.

He makes the sign for 'Master', and Hannibal frowns. Will holds out a placating hand, and shakes his head, smiling. Then, he holds both hands in front of him, forefingers extended. He

curls them into a 'C' shape, and hooks them together, right cupping left, then left cupping right.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, and Will smiles, gestures between the two of them, and makes the gesture again. Then, he spells out the word: F-R-I-E-N-D. He makes the gesture again.

Hannibal smiles. "Yes, Will," he replies, and Will relaxes with a hum. "I hope one day soon, you will consider us friends."

Will hums, a soft purr sitting low in his throat. He takes a step forward, hesitant and slow, and then rubs his forehead against Hannibal's chest like he did before. Hannibal cups the back of his head, fingers curling around the straps of the mask, and Will's purr gets louder for a brief moment, before he pulls away.

He smiles, and it feels like he's saying 'I already do'.

Since they have time to spare, Hannibal invites Alana and Will to his home for lunch. Once they're inside, he removes the collar and mask from Will and sets them on the dining room table, at the bare end. Will purrs when he does it, his smile wide and sweet. So, too, does Alana, pleased at seeing Hannibal treating Will like more of an equal than a pet.

Hannibal has them all in the kitchen while he prepares the meal. For himself and Alana, he has sausages made from the intestines of a rude dental student. He keeps some of the intestines to one side, leaving them raw for Will.

Alana notices, and regards Will with a raised eyebrow as he picks at his bowl of meat, politely scooping small bites onto a fork and eating while Hannibal cooks. "Will informed me that he gets sick when he eats anything aside from raw meat," Hannibal says at her silent question. He smiles when she nods. "Thankfully I am not a vegetarian."

She laughs. "Yes, lucky for all of us," she says brightly. Hannibal smiles at her and offers her a glass of the brew he makes just for her. Will inhales deeply when he does it, his eyes flashing to Hannibal in question, and Hannibal's smile widens. Will returns it, secretive and sly like Margot's smile. An inside joke.

"So, Will," she says, as Hannibal turns his attention to the food. It will be a short preparation process, and doesn't take up much of his attention, so Hannibal can keep a close eye on the gestures Will makes and learn sign language faster. "Jack told me you possess the ability to shapeshift."

Will swallows his bite loudly, and nods, once. "Can you change into anything you want?"

Will sets his fork down, shaking his head. He looks uncomfortable, the same distress touching him as he'd shown when Hannibal had asked him about his dreams. His eyes flash

to Hannibal, unsure. Alana senses it and gives him a gentle smile. "You don't have to tell us if you don't want to."

Will nods, biting his lower lip.

"I can show you," Will signs, and Alana says. She straightens up, unable to keep the eagerness out of her eyes. "But I need to be outside."

Alana looks at Hannibal, like a child begging her father for a chance to take a closer look at the lions in the zoo. Hannibal smiles and looks to the food. "Perhaps after lunch," he says, a small concession on his part even though he is just as eager to see what creature Will might take the shape of. "But I want you to understand, Will, that no one here is forcing you to. If you don't like to do it, I won't make you."

Will smiles, a soft sigh of relief escaping him. He rubs at his jaw, scratching at the scruff on his face, and shakes his head again. "I want to show you," Alana murmurs when he makes the signs.

Hannibal smiles, and the timer goes off, alerting him that the baked root vegetables are done. "Perfect timing," he says. "Please, go to the dining room. I shall bring the meal in shortly."

Alana smiles, grabbing her drink, and heads to the dining room. Will follows after a second of hesitation, cradling his bowl of meat in both hands. Hannibal brings in plates for himself and Alana, the sausage steaming.

Will eyes the food with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. He lifts his chin to scent it, and cocks his head to one side. "It smells good," Alana says, and Will nods in agreement.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Would you like to try some?" he asks.

Will gives it a long, long moment of consideration. Hannibal understands he doesn’t want to risk upsetting his stomach. Then he licks his lips and nods, his eyes wide and hopeful on Hannibal's plate. Hannibal smiles, and stands.

"I'll bring you some," he says, and gets a small serving of the sausage and the root vegetables for Will, returning it and setting it in front of him with a glass of water.

Will licks his fork clean and spears a piece of the sausage with a roasted carrot slice. He lifts it up and takes a deep breath of it, swallowing, and then slides the fork into his mouth. He chews and swallows, and Hannibal isn't sure why he and Alana watch with such rapt fascination. It occurs to him that Mason may have not exactly catered Will's tastes to one be that of flesh, but maybe he made actively sure that Will associated all other food with suffering. Will's appetites may not be a result of his nature, but that of his previous master's.

Will hums, licking his lips, and eats another bite of sausage. He cleans his plate and takes a drink of water, and gives Hannibal a soft smile.

"Have you ever eaten anything that's not meat before, Will?" Alana asks.

Will grimaces. "Never will any success," he signs back. "But…I would have thrown it up by now, if it was going to make me sick."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Did anything else Mason Verger fed you smell good?" he asks. "Did it smell overly-sweet, or sour?"

Will frowns, and nods.

Alana lets out a huff of righteous indignation. "He would poison you," she says, and Hannibal nods in agreement. "He must have put something in your food so you only could eat raw meat."

Will hums, considering that. He shrugs one shoulder and puts his bowl on his cleared plate and goes back to eating the raw meat Hannibal prepared. "It's not so bad," he signs. "I like the taste, and it's satisfying."

"Still, a well-rounded diet is important," Hannibal replies mildly. He turns his attention to his own food. "I shall be sure to incorporate all the necessary nutrients in your diet."

Will huffs a quiet, pleased laugh. He touches his fingers to his mouth and out to Hannibal in a 'Thank you' gesture. Alana doesn't translate.

Will is nervous. Hannibal can smell it on him, like sweat and dried figs. He leads the way out to his backyard, which is fenced around all the edges to protect privacy, a small gate at the back leading to a copse of trees and a small ravine at the bottom of a hill. It's a quiet, secretive place, covered in a light layer of snow and ice for the season.

Alana and Hannibal remain on the small porch as Will steps into the grass. He looks over his shoulder at them, his expression a curious mix of nervous and afraid. His fingers twitch and rise to his chest, as though he wants to say something, and then they fall.

He sighs and turns away, and starts to unbutton Hannibal's shirt. He shrugs it off, revealing the bruises and marks on his back. Alana gasps, her eyes flashing with another flint-strike of that righteous indignation. Hannibal feels a similar emotion in his gut; anger and protectiveness that someone dared to lay marks to this lovely creature.

It's the same feeling he gets when he sees an abused animal, but more acute. It's not sympathy. He doesn't want to reach out to Will and sooth the tender bruises and aches. Rather, he wonders what kind of man would dare to lay such marks, and why Will didn't fight back.

Or perhaps he did. Perhaps that is the reason three of his caretakers are dead and one of them is injured beyond repair. The reason he has murdered fourteen other mutants while in Mason Verger's captivity.

He folds the shirt and places it on one of the patio chairs. Then, he takes off Hannibal's suit pants, and his socks, and finally his underwear. Alana clears her throat, averting her gaze until Will turns back around, so his back is to them.

Then, Will kneels down on the snow-covered grass. His hands dig deep furrows into the ground, his back arches enough that his spine juts sharply from his skin. He's trembling, making a choked-off, gasping sound of pain.

Hannibal watches at his skin starts to split. It's messy, and bloody, and Hannibal realizes why Will told him not to buy clothes he didn't want ruined.

Will's flesh parts and falls from his body like meat off the bone, slow-roasted. He raises his claws to the back of his neck, shredding the skin from his spine to reveal thick, black hair. He lifts his head, tendons in his neck straining, his head dark with sweat. Hannibal shifts his weight, leaning forward when he sees his head start to lose form, and from his skull, the tips of antlers start to rise.

Will moans, but it sounds like a howl, agonized and fractured, and it changes from something human to something monstrous. He grunts, his eyes clenched shut, and then turns to one side so that Hannibal can see, between his jaws, the muzzle of an animal start to jut out.

His jaw cracks, the lower half falling like a snake about to eat, and the slick head of a stag shreds his human face apart and comes free. The animal is much larger than Will's human form, flaying and breaking his skin apart and forcing it to make way. Will rears up, slams his fists into the ground, and his knuckles split as though they are no sturdier than fine china. Hooves break free from behind his knuckles, his elbows pop forward and give way to forelegs. His knees break, showing bone, and then the stag crawls out of the mound of steaming, bloody flesh, and it stands.

Its coat is shining and slick with blood. The animal is all black, thick at the neck, the antlers huge and easily cresting the top of the fence. Alana lets out a shocked, frightened noise, stepping back, and Hannibal looks at her to see her eyes are wide, her face pale.

Hannibal has no idea what she's afraid of. The sight, to him, rivals the beauty of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

The stag lets out a soft bellow, steaming in the cool air, flanks heaving with its breaths. It turns, shaking its coat out, and bows its lovely, regal head, nosing at the pile of flesh it left behind.

Then, its jaws part, revealing large canines like that of a tiger, and it starts to eat the meat suit Will left behind.

The stag consumes it whole, throwing its head back to swallow like a snake eating one of its smaller kind. Alana swallows, a hand at her throat. She looks like she doesn't know whether she wants to flee or throw up.

Hannibal steps forward, and the stag lifts its head, large ears pricked towards him. Its eyes are all black, intelligence and awareness shining in them. The stag's head is at the same height as

Hannibal's, and Hannibal smiles as he comes level to the animal, less than a foot away. If Will wanted, he could lower his horns and spear Hannibal where he stood.

"Hello, Will," he says. The stag blinks, rumbles in a way that is both warm and familiar, and lowers its muzzle to Hannibal's raised hand. Its nose is warm and slick, blood coating Hannibal's skin. Hannibal thinks how lovely it would be to watch Will attack his prey, skewer the body and eat the remains fresh and bloody.

Hannibal cups the stag's face with both hands, smoothing his thumbs under the animal's dark, lovely eyes. "You are beautiful," he breathes, and the stag rumbles, bowing its head. The innermost horns touch Hannibal's shoulders. They are sharp and shining, made to kill.

Then, the stag pulls back, and huffs a heavy breath. Hannibal smiles. "I know," he says. "Change back for me."

The stag blinks, and then kneels down, and lays down. Its body shudders, human skin growing over its fur. Unlike Will's human form, which had to shed and be destroyed for the stag to come out, the change back is like it's being contained once again. The horns retract, its muzzle collapses on itself and gets swallowed by human teeth with Will's notable canines. Its bones snap and reform, knuckles and fingers grow over its hooves, its eyes fall out and Will's shine at him from behind them.

Hannibal steps back, and Will slams back into existence, breathing hard and trembling. The only thing that remains of the stag is the thicker hair around its neck, which now sits on Will's shoulders like a bloody shawl.

Will struggles to his feet, shaking and exhausted, and wraps the cloak of hair around himself as though cold. It covers most of his body, preserving his modesty and shielding his skin from the cold air. His hair is drenched in bloody sweat, it cakes his skin like shower water. Hannibal loves the shine of the red on him.

Alana rushes forward, holding out Hannibal's clothes, but Will pushes them away. He signs and Hannibal looks to Alana for translation.

She manages a weak smile, amused despite herself. "He doesn't want them to get dirty."

"Nonsense," Hannibal says. "I don't fear the dry-cleaner."

Will huffs a strangled-sounding laugh, and grabs the clothes.

Hannibal shows him the shower, and while he cleans himself off, Hannibal leaves towels and a fresh change of clothes for him, along with a smaller pair of shoes that he hopes will fit Will until he goes shopping. He takes the shawl of hair from the stag and lays it out over the patio chairs to dry. He imagines it would make a lovely pelt on his study floor.

Alana is staring into her glass, like the meaning of life might be contained within. Hannibal washes his hands at the sink. "That was…the most remarkable thing I've ever seen," she says. Her hand shakes when she takes a drink.

"Yes," Hannibal says, for he cannot deny it. "I wonder what someone like Jack would make of it."

Alana growls. "She'd call him a monster," she spits. "Lock him away and poke and prod him until it was true."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "You don't see him that way," he says. "Even after."

"I can't," she replies, shaking her head. "He's not a monster, Hannibal, and I will never forgive you if you make him think he is."

Hannibal smiles. She regards Will like a fledgling tucked under her wing. "I have no intention of doing so," he replies mildly.

"Good," she says sharply, taking another drink. "We can't tell Jack."

"No."

"We can't tell anyone."

Hannibal nods. Shapeshifting, even among mutants, is unheard of, as far as he's aware. To his knowledge nothing like Will has ever existed before.

Will comes back downstairs, fresh from the shower, his cheeks pink and his shoulders tensed. He looks at Alana with trepidation, unsure how she will react to him now. Her smile is strained, but friendly enough, and he licks his lips and then looks to Hannibal. He has the collar and mask in his hands.

He sets them down and looks at Hannibal expectantly. Hannibal sighs and shakes his head. "I don't know why you insist on this," he says, and takes the collar.

Will smiles. His hands move. "I can't shift when the collar and mask are on," Alana says for him. Hannibal regards him, head tilted. "If I am to go read those bodies for Jack, I can't risk losing control like that."

"Your shift is triggered by stress?" he asks.

Will shakes his head. "Anger. Fear," he signs. "And almost everyone who dies is afraid."

So, Will is afraid that whatever he sees in these bodies, whatever he does to reanimate them and watch their final moments, it may trigger his shift and reveal the monster lurking under his skin. Hannibal understands, but he would much rather teach Will restraint than force it upon him.

He puts the collar back on and locks it. "If you insist on keeping this up, I will make a better one for you," Hannibal says. "One that is not so…unseemly."

Will smiles, sly and mischievous. He makes a gesture and gestures to himself, then does it again, and points at Hannibal.

Alana laughs. "Unseemly for me, or for you?"

Hannibal smiles. Clever boy. He places the mask over Will's face and doesn't respond.

It's time to go see Jack.

Chapter 4

The Behavioral Science Unit offices within the FBI are not any more or less plain than the rest of the building. The main area of the office is two stories, with desk spaces filling in the bottom, and stairs and a walkway leading to offices around the top, much like the layout of Hannibal's own study. The walls are grey and blue in alternating sides, the desks a dark brown and the window-walls of the offices are transparent with large blinds to protect those inside from an overabundance of light, or to keep conversations somewhat private.

Hannibal knows that Will's appearance draws attention. It is hardly an average day when a masked and collared man walks into the FBI, bookended between two strangers. Will keeps his head down for the most part, even though Hannibal can feel him positively thrumming with curious and nervous energy.

Hannibal leads the way to Jack's office, and Jack stands and greets them when they enter. "Glad you guys could make it," he says. "Hope the drive wasn't too bad."

"It was fine," Hannibal says. Alana nods and smiles as well, and she reaches out and puts a hand on Will's shoulder. It looks like it's meant to be reassuring, and Hannibal senses Will stiffen in shock, wide-eyed at receiving a kind and protective touch. "Are the bodies ready?"

"Yes," Jack replies. He circles his desk and leads the way down the stairs, into the main lobby area. Will walks right behind Jack, Hannibal and Alana following behind. Since Hannibal is behind Will, he can see Will's head tilt this way and that as he follows Jack, taking in the snatches of conversation and the cacophony of sensory stimuli that is the result of walking through the lower levels of the BSU.

Will stops, suddenly, just as they clear the bottom of the stairs. His eyes are wide, and he gasps. Hannibal almost runs into him, and stops just shy of Will's shoulder. Will takes in a short, sharp breath, his teeth tucked behind his lips, and he raises his head, raking his eyes along the upper levels. It looks like he's searching for something.

"Will?" Hannibal murmurs. He reaches up and slides a hand through Will's hair, submitting to the desire to soothe and calm him before he even acknowledges that it's there. Will's hair is soft, still damp between his fingers from Will's shower.

Will swallows harshly, trembling. His eyes have come to a rest and Hannibal follows them, seeing that Will's shocked reaction is not one-sided. There's a woman standing on the top floor, gazing back down at Will. She meets his gaze steadily, her jaw clenched like Will's presence is making her angry.

Then, the FBI agent she's standing with draws her attention again, and the moment is broken. Will sags like there were strings holding him upright and they've been cut. He swallows harshly, his fingers trembling, and frantically reaches out to tug on Alana's coat.

Alana regards him and Will signs something very quickly, then puts his finger to his lips to get her to be quiet about it. Alana's eyes go wide as well, before she frowns, and follows

Will's quick gesture back up to the woman.

"What did he say?" Hannibal asks.

Will swallows and rubs at the collar on his neck, his trembling fingers curling around the metal like he needs it to remind himself how to stay calm. Hannibal gently cups his skull and pulls his head to Hannibal's chest, covering his sight lines.

Will sags against him, nails digging into his coat, and lets out a plaintive whimper. It's not one of fear, but of pain. His eyes crinkle at the corners when he clenches them tightly shut.

"Go take him to the examination rooms," Alana whispers, quiet but urgent. "I'll tell Jack what's going on and join you down there. You know where they are?"

Hannibal nods. He tucks Will's shoulder under his arm and shushes him when Will whines again, and moves as discreetly as he can out of the main cubicle area. Of course, there's no real way to move someone like Will without drawing some attention, but Hannibal likes to think he did a pretty good job of it, all things considered.

The only attention he draws is that of a white-coated woman, who Hannibal recognizes from the same conference where he met Jack. He smiles at her and she regards both him and Will with a raised eyebrow and an unimpressed look.

"Are you the guests I'm expecting?" she asks.

Hannibal nods, and finally lets Will go. Will seems to have recovered, for the most part. His shoulders and chest are heaving and his eyes are very dark, but he doesn't look like he's in distress anymore. His mask is steaming and he keeps scratching below his ears, just past the collar line. Hannibal wonders if he's trying to shed his skin.

"I'm Beverly," the woman says after a moment, holding out her hand for Hannibal to shake. He does so, and then she holds her hand out to Will. Will looks at her for a moment, licks his lips, and then shakes her hand quickly, returning it to his side and burying it in Hannibal's long shirt sleeve. "Jack told me to expect you guys."

"Doctor Lecter," Hannibal says with a cordial nod. "And this is Will."

"Nice to meet you both. Please, this way."

She turns, tucking her hands into the pockets of her white lab coat, and leads them down a brightly-lit corridor. They get into an elevator at the end and step inside and the doors slide closed.

"How long have you been on Jack's team?" Hannibal asks, out of the polite social constructs that demand not to let a silence stretch too long.

Beverly turns and smiles, lopsided and smug. "Little over five years," she replies. "How long have you known Jack?"

"We met a year before this, but I haven't known him in a professional, permanent way for long," Hannibal says.

Beverly hums. "He must like you, then," she says, and Hannibal raises his eyebrows. The doors open and they step out into another brightly-lit corridor. This one has more window-walls, with various examination rooms with metal tables and drawers for the corpses lining each side of the corridor. "Jack guards this lab like El Dorado."

Beside him, Will huffs. His panic seems to have gone away, which is good. His eyes are brilliantly blue in the fluorescence, his skin pale except for the chafing around his neck and the pink on his cheeks from the upper levels' heat. The air down here is cool, climate-controlled to slow the decay as much as possible, and the air is subtly tainted with the scent of old blood.

Will's nostrils flare as he takes in a deep breath, his eyes flashing to one side as Beverly leads them past a window-wall, and then into the room. There are two bodies on tables, and two men bent over them, mid-examination.

"Jimmy, Brian, look alive!" Beverly barks, and the two men lift their heads with a mix of aggravation and surprise. "Jack's guests are here."

One of the men straightens with a hum, eyebrows raised. He has gloves on, fingertips bloody, and a pair of surgical scissors in his hand. "And where is Jack?" he asks, almost huffing the question. He has grey hair and when he fixes an incredulous look on Hannibal and Will, his forehead wrinkles sharply.

Hannibal smiles. "Elsewhere," he says.

Both men share a look, eyebrows raised, and Beverly rolls her eyes and steps forward, shooing them away from the man's body. "They're here because this one," she points at Will, "is apparently a mutant who can talk to the dead."

Will winces. His fingers twitch to protest, before he stops, realizing no one would be able to understand him. His eyes flash to Hannibal, showing an aggravation that Hannibal shares. He can think of no time in his life when learning sign language would have benefited him, or even when he might have thought to try, and yet here he stands and feels like a fool for not doing so.

"Jimmy, Brian, move," Beverly says. "We don't have all day."

The men raise their hands, making a show of acquiescing to her. Hannibal likes Beverly immediately at that moment. She has Jack's command, Alana's low tolerance for bullshit, and Margot's ease of movement through a room. She walks into a place and owns it immediately, and Hannibal can appreciate someone like that.

Will swallows, looking at Hannibal again, and Hannibal gives him an encouraging nod and smile. Will smiles back, and then bows his head and turns to one side, gesturing for Hannibal to release the straps on his mask.

Hannibal hums, more than happy to take it off of him. He hopes that the collar is enough to keep the stag at bay, but if Will isn't worried then Hannibal isn't either. He trusts Will to know what he can do more than Hannibal does, at the moment.

Will parts his jaws, closes his eyes, and breathes deeply again, like he had been unable to do so with the mask on. His eyes open and he smiles gratefully at Hannibal, and walks slowly over so that he's standing between the two bodies. The man is still opened up, his intestines and ribcage on display. Will cocks his head to one side.

Hannibal moves, his attention drawn as Jack and Alana come down the corridor. Jack looks harried, and Alana's expression is one of awe. "What happened?" Hannibal asks in greeting. Will has stopped, his head raised to meet Alana's eyes. He lets out a quiet rumble.

"That woman…" Alana swallows, and shakes her head.

"According to Agent Rhodes, her name is Eva Kingsley. She had come in, claiming to be an eyewitness to the disappearance of a young boy from a fairground last week."

Will lets out a sharp growl, baring his teeth. Hannibal sees Jack's eyebrows rise, then lower, frowning as he takes in the fact that Will is no longer wearing his mask. Will swallows, presses his lips together, and lowers his head to try and appear as non-threatening as possible.

"Hannibal," Alana says, putting a hand on his arm, "Will told me to check her car. There were three boys in there, including the one that was reported missing. And two others, from abductions years ago all over Maryland."

"The previous two boys' families ended up being murdered a year after they were taken," Jack says. "We're getting a confession from her now. She seemed eager enough to talk. She said she was reporting the youngest boy missing so that the police would look the wrong way."

Hannibal frowns, and looks to Will. Will swallows. "Did you know this woman, Will?" he asks.

Will's eyes drop, and he looks between Jack, Jimmy, Brian, and Beverly like he's nervous. His hands twitch and he raises them, and lowers them again. He shakes his head. He lets out a quiet whine and Hannibal feels compelled to rush to him.

He turns Will towards him and cups his cheek with one hand, making sure Will is looking into his eyes, not at the floor. "Will, they need to know how you knew," he says. After all, the woman seemed to have recognized him as well, and if that's the case, she could implicate Will in her crimes.

Will bites his lower lip, his eyes tightening at the corners as he grits his teeth, brow furrowing. Hannibal steps back so that Alana can see his hands move.

He touches his temple, flattens his hand, then points upward. "I don't know her," Alana says as Will signs. He touches his temple again and then curls his right hand towards his nose,

jaws parted like he's trying to take a deep breath in of something. "But I know her scent. She came to one of the auctions, once. She bought a boy."

Hannibal blinks, straightening. "Jack, if one of those boys is a mutant, he could be dangerous," he says.

"I've already got a team on it," Jack replies briskly.

Hannibal looks back at Will. "Do you know which boy she bought?" he asks, and Will bites his lower lip. He swallows, and nods. "What abilities did he have?"

Will shakes his head. "Nothing of note," he signs, and Alana says. "Slightly elevated sense of smell and hearing. Good eyesight. Probably good for a lookout, or a guard dog."

Will hesitates, his eyes lowered but bright with anxiety. "I'm sorry for causing a scene," Alana says for him. "I just had to do something."

And Hannibal thinks it's a mighty fine coincidence that Will happened to come to the office at the precise time that the woman was there, and that she happened to not just be a mutant owner – which is not illegal – but likely a murderer as well. And now he's in Hannibal's care, a cannibal mutant with a cannibal monster. Funny how things work out.

Hannibal presses his lips together, considering it for a moment, and then he nods.

"A happy twist of fate that we were here, then," he says brightly, and then smiles at Will. Will is innocent in all of it, at least. "Perhaps we should get back to the matter at hand so we can get out of your team's way, Jack."

Jack hums, stepping into the room, Alana a silent shadow behind Hannibal's shoulder. She's breathing shakily, eager to see another facet of the absolutely marvelous creature that Will is. If he has a gift to re-animate the dead, then this promises to be an exciting scene.

Will looks at Hannibal for a long moment, before he nods, licking his lips. He stands between the two tables, looking between the man and the woman, back and forth. Then, he reaches out, hand just shy of the woman's cheek.

"Don't touch them!" Will flinches, fingers curling when one of the men yells it out.

"Brian, for Christ's sake!" Beverly snaps. She has a hand on her own heart and is glaring at the shorter, black-haired man. "Almost gave me a heart attack!"

"Well, he -." Brian rubs a hand over his mouth and shakes his head. "He can't touch 'em."

"We already know the cause of death, don't we?" Jack demands.

"Well, yes, but -."

"*But*?"

Brian hesitates, then gestures at the bodies. "There could still be something to find!"

Will smiles, and his hands move. "If there's something left to find, I'll find it for you," he signs, and Alana says. Hannibal feels a warm glow of pride in his chest at the irritated look he receives for that particular comment.

Then, Will cocks his head to one side, his hand reaching back out to the woman. Brian and Jimmy both press their lips together, fighting back their protests, and when Will's bare fingers touch the woman's shoulder, Brian huffs and Jimmy rolls his eyes. Will grins at them, baring his canines, and turns his attention away from them fully, so that he can look over the woman's body.

He closes his eyes, breathing in deeply. His jaws part, his teeth shining in the light reflecting off the metal table, and then he opens his eyes and cups the woman's face with both hands. He pushes her eyelids up, revealing milky irises.

Then, he leans down, and it almost looks like he's about to kiss her. His forehead touches hers and his nose slides into place alongside, and there's such a small amount of space between her closed lips and Will's open ones. Hannibal images it's the same amount of space that would be there if he was still wearing his mask.

Will swallows loudly enough to be heard, his hands go tight on the woman's face, and then he heaves in a breath and shudders. The lights flicker on overhead and Hannibal lifts his gaze, humming curiously.

Will chokes on a gasp, straightening up. The pupils in his eyes spill like water from a broken container, overtaking his iris and the whites until his eyes are black, completely black like the stag's eyes had been. The woman's eyes are as well, shining like the shell of a beetle behind her lashes. Hannibal watches as her body jerks like she's been electrocuted. Her chest rises, her stomach tenses up and heaves. Her lips part in a soundless scream.

Fresh blood starts to leak from the surgical cuts on her abdomen, and pool on the table from where she was skinned.

Will lets out a tight, pained whimper. His jaw is clenched, teeth bared. He rolls his head to one side and his back heaves, like he's listening to a demon perched on his shoulder, the thing's claws digging in to rend his skin from his back. The woman's body twitches again, her hands clenching in time with Will's ragged breathing, his heartbeat.

His lips are moving. Every now and again, a breath escapes that sounds like it could be a word, but his broken neck can't make them properly and then the lights flicker again, and Will lets go of the woman. He falls to his knees with a gasp, sending the tray of examination instruments on the adjacent table flying. The woman goes still, black leaking from her eyes, her body once again cold and dead. Her blood starts to dry, darkening and cooling as soon as Will's touch leaves her.

Hannibal rushes forward and Will grabs for him blindly. There's black oozing from behind his teeth, his mouth looks too wide, like it's breaking apart at the corners. Hannibal takes him by the hair and covers Will's shoulders, his other hand fitting the mask over Will's jaw as tightly as he can.

Will grabs onto him, one hand in Hannibal's coat, the other braced by his knee on the floor. He's trembling, back heaving in terribly ragged breaths, and he's making noises like a kicked dog that's nursing its wounds and something in Hannibal, something very angry and dark, uncurls and slithers down his spine.

Mason Verger did this to him. He did it in a way that makes Will suffer. Is it *this* thought that Hannibal finds the most intolerable. For no matter how amazing Will's gifts make him, the fact of the matter is that they were given to him by someone who delights in his suffering and pain when he uses them. And that is something that Hannibal cannot abide.

After a moment, Will's breath goes quieter, and his heart isn't pounding so harshly that Hannibal can feel it against his chest. Will tilts his head, nuzzling Hannibal's arm. His hair is dark and slick with sweat, it's staining his clothes and, when Hannibal runs a hand over Will's forehead, his skin is clammy and warm.

It feels like his body is trying to fight back the effects of death with all its might.

Will breathes out, and lifts his shaking hands to the mask, slowly pulling it back. His mouth looks better, and he swallows and wipes the black ooze from his lips. He raises his eyes and Hannibal cups his face, and Will manages a weak smile, before they both get to their feet.

"…Okay, *what* in the holy *Hell* was that?"

Brian's voice is high and thin. Everyone is staring at Will with wide eyes, a spectrum of amazement and terror spread out between them. Alana, at least, looks like she expected something like this to happen. She had seen the stag, after all.

Will clears his throat and wipes at his mouth again, before he sets his eyes on Jack. "I saw them," he signs, and Alana says. "They were a couple, staying the night in the motel. He took them there, drugged them and skinned them while they were still alive." He swallows, and looks back at the woman. "I saw his face."

Jack raises his eyebrows. "Can you describe it to a sketch artist?" he asks. Will nods.

"He should be contained! He brought a fucking dead woman back to life and -!"

"I'm well aware of what just happened, Jimmy, thank you." Hannibal smiles, his hands in his pockets as he watches through the one-way mirror as Will and Alana sit down with a sketch artist in a holding cell. Will has his mask back on, sitting snug to his face, gesturing smoothly while Alana translates for him and the artist draws the face of the Angel maker.

Jack, Jimmy, Beverly, and Brian stand behind him. So far the conversation has gone from wild shock, to outright denial, and now it's settling on fear and anger. Hannibal wonders when Jimmy will move to the next stage: bargaining. He reacts to what he's seen as if he's

just been told he's going to die. It's a natural reaction to fear, but unwarranted, in Hannibal's opinion.

Will is turning out to be more and more fascinating by the hour. Hannibal watches his hands move, and every now and again there is a quiet moment while the artist changes her sketch, and in those moments, Will's eyes lift and meet his exactly, like he can see Hannibal through the mirror. Hannibal smiles, and he smiles back, affectionate and soft.

"I'm just saying, you can't just bring something in like that without warning us, Jack! Just… *warn* us next time," Jimmy hisses.

"I won't have to warn you next time, do I?" Jack replies, as coolly as ever. "Now you know what to expect."

"Did you know he could do that?" Beverly asks quietly, framing Hannibal's shoulder, Jack on his other side as they step forward to watch Will, Alana, and the sketch artist.

Jack hums. "Will told us he would be able to see and hear what the body saw and heard in their final moments, if it was fresh enough," he replies.

"I wonder if the wholeness of the victim has any bearing on it," Hannibal notes. "For instance, if it was missing a head, could he still read it?"

"Let's hope we don't have much opportunity to test that out," Jack says darkly. Hannibal's smile widens.

Will's attention is drawn back to the artist as she shows him another version of the killer. Will frowns, shaking his head, his lips twitching in frustration. Hannibal imagines that the likeness will do well enough, but Will, it seems, is a perfectionist.

Jack leans over and presses a button on the side of the mirror, letting the sound come through. "How we doing in here?"

Alana huffs. "Almost done," she replies. Will's hands move quickly, and he's looking at her with thinly-veiled impatience. Arguing with her. Hannibal is glad that he feels comfortable enough to do so. She sighs. "Will, it's fine. We've got -."

Will growls, curling his hands, and slams one down on the table hard enough to make it jolt. Jack goes tense beside him, and then Will stands and leans over the table. Before anyone can react, he has his palm flat against the sketch artist's forehead, curling around her skull. His eyes go black.

Jack lets out a curse, rushing out of the observation room. Jimmy and Brian dart forward, wide-eyed, their and Beverly's demeanor like they fully expect something terrible to happen.

By the time Jack bursts through the room to the holding cell, Will's eyes are back to normal, and he slowly pulls his hand back from the sketch artist's head. She gasps, her head rolling to one side for a brief moment like she's unconscious.

"What the Hell did you do?" Jack demands. Hannibal goes tense, fighting back the instinct to put himself between Jack and Will. Will is perfectly capable of handling himself.

But if such a thing is to repeat like the auction chamber, it could get very messy.

The sketch artist gasps, straightening up. Her eyes are wide, fingers shaking, and she's staring at Will. Will meets her gaze steadily, and then pushes her sketch pad and pencil into her hands. She starts to draw, not breaking eye contact from him for a second.

Jack comes closer, and Hannibal leaves the observation room to enter the holding cell. He comes to a stop over the sketch artist's shoulder, and sees that she has started a new sketch. It is a lot like the other ones, but so incredibly detailed and fine.

Will smiles when she's finished, and sits down with a nod. He makes a sign with his hands. "Perfect," Alana breathes.

Hannibal looks down at the sketch. It could almost be an edited photograph, lacking the fine things like color, but it's shaded in, detailed down to the wrinkles around the eyes and the swoop of the hair. Will lets out a happy purr, drumming his fingers on the table. It's dented where his fist landed.

The artist hands Jack her drawing. She seems unharmed. Just dazed.

Will is still purring, smiling behind his mask. His hands make another series of gestures, and the moment is broken when Alana gives a shaky laugh.

"He…" She runs a hand through her hair, shaking her head, and puts a hand on his arm. "He says he wishes he could draw as well as Miss Jameson can."

The sketch artist smiles, blushing at the praise. "Thank you, Will," she says, and Will nods to her. She stands. "Agent Crawford, if that'll be all?"

"Thank you, Miss Jameson. I think we're done here," Jack replies. She nods and leaves the room. "I'll run this sketch through facial recognition, see if anything pings. Doctor Lecter, Doctor Bloom…. Will. Thank you for your help today. I'm sure I'll be in touch soon."

"Godspeed, Agent Crawford," Hannibal says mildly. Jack nods and leaves the room. Hannibal waits until he hears the door to the observation room shut, meaning Beverly, Jimmy, and Brain have left as well. He turns to look back at Will. "You're just full of surprises, aren't you?"

Will huffs a sheepish laugh, shrugging his shoulders. "How did you do that?" Alana asks, her eyes wide and amazed.

Will's fingers twitch, and then he raises them, his eyes on Hannibal. "I put the image of the man in her head," Alana says for him. "She wasn't getting it right, and I couldn't describe him well enough, so I showed her."

"Can you project anything into anyone's head?" Hannibal asks, and Will nods.

"It's one of the gifts my master gave me," Alana says. "I can make anyone see anything."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Like a hallucination?"

Will shakes his head. "No. It doesn't alter their reality. They are who they are, and they know what they know. I just help them see."

A dangerous gift. Hannibal slides the chair back in which Miss Jameson had sat, and takes a seat. "I'd like you to show me," he says.

Will cocks his head to one side. "What would you like to see?"

Hannibal shrugs, spreading his hands in an open gesture. "Whatever you want me to see, I suppose," he says. "I would like to experience it for myself."

Will smiles. He nods, and stands, circling the table. He comes to a stop in front of Hannibal, who turns so that he's facing Will in his chair. Will kneels, his legs tucked between Hannibal's shins, and he puts his hands gently on either side of Hannibal's face.

He hums, and blinks slowly, nodding for Hannibal to do the same. Hannibal closes his eyes, and feels Will's warm forehead touch his.

Hannibal opens his eyes, and looks around. He's in his study, sitting in his chair. A fire crackles and pops away in the fireplace, and the room is lit solely from the glow emanating from the fire. The rest of the room is in shadow.

He hears a sound like a great beast heaving a breath, and turns his head. In the middle of the room, where the couch should be, he sees a giant black stag, its eyes and horns gleaming in the golden light of the fire. He smiles.

"Hello, Will."

"Hello, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, and turns his head again. A vision of Will's human shape greets him, sitting comfortably in the chair opposite. He smiles at Hannibal, and his teeth are human and white, his eyes a lovely, shaded green-blue.

"You can speak, in my head?" he asks.

Will spreads his hands out, sinking low in the chair. "This is how you see me," he replies. He runs his tongue over his teeth and clucks it in the side of his mouth like the Verger children do. "Human. Soft." He looks down at himself, lacking the collar, the mask, the claws. "I'm flattered."

Hannibal smiles. "Why do you think Mason Verger gave you these gifts?"

"I know why," Will murmurs. He runs a hand through his hair, shifts his weight. "My master was not a kind man. Whenever someone suffered so much that they died, he would have me get in their heads and bring them back so that he could watch it all over again. And when I couldn't bring them back, he would simply make me suffer in their stead, until he grew bored." Will's eyes flash, dark. He works his jaw from side to side and bares his teeth. "He rarely grew bored."

Hannibal hums. "Mason Verger is a true sadist," he says. "But you grew close to Margot, as well."

Will nods, smiling affectionately. "She was kind to me," he replies, his gaze growing far away and fond. "I want to do right by her. Honor her, I suppose you'd call it." His voice is sweet and quiet, soothing as Hannibal hears it. he's overwhelmed with how powerfully Will's voice affects him. It makes his head feel warm and his stomach clench.

"And what do you make of me?" he asks. Will's gaze snaps to his and, next to them, the stag breathes heavily. Hannibal smiles. "Speak openly, Will. I promised not to harm you. I won't be angry. I'm curious to know what you think."

Will tilts his head to one side, drumming his nails on the armrest of his chair.

Then, he stands, and holds his hand out to Hannibal. "Let me show you," he murmurs, and Hannibal regards his outstretched hand for a moment, before he takes it and allows Will to pull him to his feet. Will guides him a few steps away, and then puts his hands on Hannibal's shoulders, and turns him.

There is a figure sitting in Hannibal's chair. It is humanoid, but all black, with extremely large claws and cloven feet, an extra joint following its knees like that of a goat. Its body is thickly covered, it looks like it's made of coal. Its eyes are a glowing yellow, fixed on the stag. It has horns on its head, just as mighty as Will's, stretching up so high that they melt into the shadows where the firelight doesn't touch.

Its face bears a striking resemblance to Hannibal's.

Will comes into view beside him, his face reverent as he looks upon the demonic figure. "This is what I see, when I look at you," he breathes.

"A monster?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles. "No more a monster than I am," he replies, and Hannibal isn't sure if that counts as an agreement. He looks over at the stag and sees that it's looking straight back at him, ears forward, nostrils flared. It seems eager.

This is utterly fascinating. A glimpse into Will's mind just as transparent as Will seeing into his. He looks back at his own likeness. Its eyes are on the stag, its claws digging into the armrests of his chair with something like restraint.

"Doctor Lecter," Will says, and puts a hand on Hannibal's arm. His head is tilted to one side, like he's listening to something. "We must go."

Before Hannibal can reply, or protest, Will turns him and puts a hand over his eyes. He hears something move, a great beast rising to its feet, and when he opens his eyes again Will gasps, and pulls away. He's back in the holding cell, and watches as Will's eyes fade from pure black, back to their original color. There's sweat on his brow, his fingers are shaking.

A single drop of black is running from his nose, coating his mouth behind the mask.

Hannibal touches his own face, expecting to feel the same. There's nothing. The door opens and Hannibal turns to see Jack at the door, his expression a curious mix of excited and grim.

"There's been another Angel," he says, and Hannibal wonders how long they could have possibly been in here. It seems like hardly a moment has passed. "Come with me."

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> warning for people who have arachnophobia 'cause let me tell you I do and this chapter made me itchy. it's a very small section and feel free to message me here or on tumblr if you want clarification.

Hannibal removes the mask so that Will can clean his face as they wait for Jack to gather them. The second Angel is in Cleveland, Ohio, so Jack is away getting them flight plans so that they can fly out and observe the scene. As Hannibal understands it, Jimmy, Brian, and Beverly will be accompanying them. If Will is to go, Hannibal must legally be there as well, to act as a chaperone, but he isn't sure if Jack intends to collect the body and bring it back for Will to examine or not.

It appears that profiling for the FBI involves a gratuitous amount of waiting. Normally, Hannibal would be aggravated by that, but it means he gets to spend more time with Will in thorough examination, and he can honor Alana's request to study him as well. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement all round, he supposes, although it promises that in the future he will have less time to hunt for himself and Will.

Alana hands Will a tissue from her purse, her brow furrowed in concern when Will takes it with a grateful smile, licks it, and dabs at the black ooze that had leaked out of his nose. "Is that normal?" she asks, nodding to it.

Will shrugs one shoulder and huffs. He touches his fingers to his temple, then flattens his palm out. *I don't know*. His hands move more and Alana translates for him; "I never noticed it before when I was doing it for my master. Probably."

Her eyes darken and her jaw clenches. She looks at Hannibal with something like accusation. "What did he show you?" she demands.

Hannibal straightens up and hums, the mask sitting in his lap. "We were in my study," he says. "We had a short conversation. That's all."

Alana raises an eyebrow. "You understood him?" she asks.

Hannibal smiles, remembering Will's soft, lovely voice. "He can speak when he's in my head," he replies. "The mind is a powerful thing, Alana. Anything that can be imagined is possible when inside of it."

Will smiles affectionately, wiping the rest of the black from his upper lip and throwing the tissue away. He's no longer distressed; his scent is back to normal and the sweat has dried

from his brow. "If this man made another Angel so quickly, he must have been driving all day," he signs, and Alana says.

Hannibal nods. "Perhaps he sees his end looming ahead of him," he suggests.

Will shrugs.

They all straighten as the door to Jack's office opens, revealing the man, grave-faced. "Everything's ready," he says. "You all have an hour to pack an overnight bag, and then you'll meet us at the airport."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, but stands. Will follows suit and he smiles at Alana, and follows Hannibal out of the BSU offices and towards his car. Hannibal notes, as they pass, that the woman Will had singled out before is sitting, handcuffed to an agent's desk, giving her confession. Eva Kingsley. Will doesn't look at her.

They leave the building and Alana drives to her own home, leaving Will and Hannibal alone. Without Alana to translate, their conversations promise to be short and one-sided, but Hannibal is confident that he will enjoy Will's silences just as much as his conversation.

They get into his car and an idea occurs to him. He takes out his cell phone and hands it to Will. "Do you know how to use one of these?" he asks. Will's brow furrows, a flicker of recognition passing through his eyes as he takes the phone and holds it in both hands. "Here." Hannibal takes it back, opens up a browser, and goes to Google Translate. "Type in what you want to say and press this button." He points at the icon that looks like a speaker. "The phone will read it out to me, so I can understand you."

Will's eyes light up, pretty and blue, and he smiles and nods. Hannibal smiles back, petting a hand through Will's hair in another affectionate gesture he finds difficult to justify, and starts the car.

Will's fingers move over the keyboard on the phone, soft clicks breaking the silence. The phone is paired to Hannibal's car, so when he presses the speaker button, it comes through loud and clear on Hannibal's car stereo. "I've never been on a plane before."

Hannibal hums. "I imagine it's much more pleasant than a cage on the back of a truck."

Will huffs. "That depends," the car says for him. "How do they normally handle animals on planes?"

Hannibal presses his lips together, merging into traffic on the main road towards his home. "That depends on the amount of money you're willing to spend, and the type of animal. But you're not an animal, Will."

"Jack seems to think so."

Hannibal looks towards him. Will doesn't appear angry. More nervous than anything else. "Even in my head, you present yourself as a great stag," he says. "And me, a horned man."

Will nods, swallowing, his fingers lightly tapping against the edge of the phone. "Are these things you create with your imagination?"

Will hums. "What do you mean?" the car says.

"I mean…. I'm wondering if these are things you read as you might read a room, or if they are things you create in your head to help you distance and dehumanize your captors, or the people you interact with."

Will frowns, remaining silent. When Hannibal looks at him, he makes the gesture for 'I don't know', but it feels like 'I don't understand'. "I know what your human face looks like," he types out, letting the car speak for him again. "And Alana's, and Jack's, and Margot's. I'm not blind."

"I'm not saying you are," Hannibal replies, and tries to think of words that would help Will understand what he is trying to ask. "Merely, when you showed me that version of myself, you said that he is what you see, when you look at me. When does that change happen? When does the man melt away and reveal the monster?"

Will breathes out quietly, and it sounds like an 'Oh' of realization. "It comes and goes," Will says. "The first time I saw you was in the bidding room."

Hannibal smiles. "So you *can* see through that kind of glass," he says. Will nods. "What do you see when you look at Alana?"

Will's smile turns soft and affectionate. He bites his lower lip. "It would be easier to show you," he types out.

"Show me, then."

Will rolls his eyes. He points to his eyes, then Hannibal's, then out to the road. He mimics the action of driving and Hannibal hums. "I suppose you're right," he says, and Will huffs in agreement. He sets the phone down and rubs his fingers over his jaw and under his nose.

They sit in companionable silence for a while, until Hannibal pulls off the main road and through the smaller suburban roads that lead to his home. Will hums, his eyes heavy-lidded, and he looks outside as they pass the townhouses, the larger single-family homes, the one park that sits a few blocks away from Hannibal's house.

He chirps curiously, blinking and sitting up straight when he sees the park. There's a mutant in the park. It stands out, with its dog-like ears and wildly wagging tail. It's playing with a human child, wrestling with it and a purebred animal as well. The child's laughter is loud enough to hear, even in the car as they pass by.

Hannibal hums, drawing Will's attention. "Did you ever have a family, Will?"

Will frowns, and shakes his head.

"You must have," he says. "Everyone has a mother, and a father. Perhaps you had siblings, or cousins. Even a mate and children."

Will huffs, shaking his head. "I think I'd remember a mate and children," he types out.

"You said you didn't know anything of your previous life," Hannibal says, pulling into a parking spot opposite his house. Will nods, brow furrowing. "You must have existed for more than three years. Unless rapid aging is another 'gift' Mason Verger gave you."

Will hesitates, looking down. His expression is troubled, as though it only just occurred to him that there could be anything before his life with the Vergers. He bites his lower lip, looks at Hannibal with another thin thread of nervousness in his eyes, and then types out another message.

Hannibal has turned the car off, so it just comes through the phone's speaker; "Margot would probably know more."

Hannibal nods, and Will hands his phone back. He catches Hannibal's sleeve, letting out a soft whine. He presses his hand to his chest and circles it, once. Then, he cups both hands like claws and draws them to himself. His left hand makes a fist and he holds his forearm flat across him like he's resting it on a shelf, his other hand holding up his first two fingers and rotating over his closed fist. Then, he points to Hannibal.

Hannibal lets out an amused huff. "I may be a quick learner, but I'm not that quick."

Will smiles. He reaches out, hesitates, pulls his fingers back. He wants to touch Hannibal, but is waiting for permission. Hannibal gives him a nod of approval, holding out his hand. Will's smile widens and he slides his dry palm against Hannibal's, the heels of their hands crushing each other, Will's fingers spreading to wrap around his wrist.

Hannibal closes his eyes, and when he opens them he's in his study again. Will is standing in front of him, 'human' and 'soft', as Hannibal had imagined him before.

He takes Hannibal's hands and meets his eyes. "I'm sorry," he says. He wraps his fingers around Hannibal's right hand, makes him fold his arm, and circles Hannibal's fist around his heart like Will had done in the car. "This means 'I'm sorry'."

Hannibal nods.

"This is 'I want'." Will curls his hands again, claws sharp and palms facing upward. He jerks his hands towards himself like he's tearing something back, a dog trying to wrestle its toy from its master's hands. Then, he does the next gesture, with one arm flat and closed-fisted. His other hand, Hannibal realizes now that he's being slower about it, is making the letter 'U', circling above the fist. "This is 'useful'," Will says. Then, he points at Hannibal, and his smile widens, soft and kind.

"You want to be useful to me," Hannibal says, and Will nods. He sighs. "Oh, Will, one day I hope you will realize that your usefulness to me is not proportional to the amount of care I intend to give you."

"You bought me for a purpose," Will says, somewhat tightly. Beside them, in the shadows of the fire, Hannibal sees movement. The stag's head is visible only by the way its horns and

eyes gleam in the firelight, reflecting the flames. The stag is standing, looking at Hannibal like a real animal might regard oncoming headlights. "That purpose is to be useful. To the FBI, to you, it hardly matters."

"Part of me wants to caution you at appearing too eager," Hannibal replies, putting his hands in his pockets. He's still looking at the stag, and as he looks, he sees the humanoid, demonic version of himself come into view from behind the animal. Its eyes are glowing and yellow, and Hannibal watches as it puts a hand on the stag's thick pelt around its neck. He wonders if the action is an extension of his own psyche, or Will's.

Will huffs, and Hannibal regards him again. He's smiling. "Yes," he says. "I imagine there are things I shouldn't look at too closely. Like where my food comes from."

"Luckily you can eat other things," Hannibal says mildly, neither confirming or denying Will's words. "It will make sure the rations don't run out too soon."

Will hums. "When I was with my master," he says, and steps closer, turning to one side so that he and Hannibal both regard their monster selves. Unblinking. Unmoving. "He liked to starve me before a fight, or before I touched a dead body."

"Wind him up, watch him go," Hannibal murmurs, distastefully. Will hums again. "When you fought, did you fight as man, or as a stag?"

"Fifty-fifty," Will replies. His voice sounds hoarse but Hannibal doesn't turn to look. "I don't bleed right. My blood is dark."

"Blood looks black in the darkness," Hannibal says. "In moonlight."

Will smiles. In front of them, the stag finally breaks eye contact with Hannibal. It turns its great, regal head, and bows it so that its muzzle touches the chest of the demon-man. Hannibal watches as the demon's long-clawed hands cup the stag's face, gentle and reverent.

Hannibal sighs, and then he closes his eyes and opens them again, finding that he has his hand in Will's hair, his other still cradled within Will's on the gear shift. He lifts his gaze quickly enough to see Will's black eyes fade back, the darkness in him fought and corralled by the whites and his iris like the stag becomes encased in his human skin after a change.

Will's expression is soft and fond, not quite smiling, but hinting at one. He lets out a soft purr and tilts his head to nuzzle Hannibal's palm, and Hannibal smiles and pulls back, breaking the connection. His wrist feels overly-sore, tingling and pink. His fingers curl.

"Come," he says, and opens the door. Will gets out on the other side and joins him as they cross the street and head into his house. "When we return, I will be sure to get you some proper clothes," he says, gesturing to the slightly awkward way Will is walking, careful for his feet not to slip out of Hannibal's shoes. He looks juvenile in Hannibal's oversized outfits.

Hannibal finds it endearing, but it is simply impractical.

Will huffs, his eyes bright like he can tell what Hannibal is thinking. He steps inside and thumbs at the collar of Hannibal's shirt. Hannibal takes his collar off and sets it on the kitchen island with his mask. Will takes a seat on a stool on the side of the kitchen island.

Hannibal smiles at him, pets a hand through his hair simply because he can, and Will purrs, lips twitching in a smile in answer. "Would you like to eat while I pack for us?" he asks.

Will raises his eyebrows, giving Hannibal a swift once-over. Then he presses his lips together and nods, and Hannibal takes out the remaining sausage and microwaves it, setting it in front of Will with a fork. He also puts in front of Will an apple, a banana, and a bowl of pistachios. He sets out a glass of milk alongside.

Will cocks his head to one side. "If any of these smells good to you, I'd encourage you to try them," Hannibal says. "You may have some digestive limitations outside of what Mason Verger conditioned into you. If you're willing to experiment."

Will raises his eyes, then he nods. He picks up the apple and presses it under his nose, taking a deep inhale like Hannibal might savor the bouquet of a fine wine. Will parts his jaws and sinks his teeth into the skin of the apple. It crunches loudly. It's a Braeburn, noted by Hannibal for its cushier consistency at the flesh. Will hums, his eyes closing as he chews and swallows his bite. He takes another one almost immediately, a purr sitting low in his chest at the flavor.

Hannibal smiles, and leaves the room so that he can pack for the both of them. He always keeps a small bag full of clothes and a stash of money just in case anything drastic happens, so it is no trouble to add some additional clothes for Will. He also packs a lighter jacker for Will to use, in case the Ohio weather disagrees with him.

He pauses when he folds the jacket, feeling something thin in the pocket. He takes it out, realizing it's the dog whistle Ichi gave him when he first purchased Will. He presses his lips together, feeling that same distaste rolling through his stomach. He sets the whistle on his bedside table, packs the jacket, and heads back downstairs.

Will has completely consumed everything. Hannibal sees no evidence of the apple core, the banana peel, or even the pistachio shells. All that remains is the plate on which the sausage was, the fork, and the bowl where Hannibal had poured the pistachios. The glass of milk is empty and he watches as Will wipes his forearm across his mouth.

Will looks up as he approaches, purring and happy. Hannibal huffs an amused breath. "You know, half of those foods would be considered inedible," he says. "You're not supposed to eat the shells, for instance."

Will hums. He looks down at the empty plate and bowl, and then shrugs. He parts his jaws and makes a gesture like he's wafting the scent towards himself, which Hannibal remembers meaning 'scent' or 'smell'. Then, Will rubs his fingers across his mouth, his middle finger tracing the place where his lips meet, and he looks up at Hannibal and smiles.

"Does that mean it tasted good?" Hannibal asks, and Will hums and makes a 'so-so' motion with his hand. Hannibal rolls his eyes, a good-natured smile on his face, and he squeezes

Will's shoulder gently. "Come with me. We will have to hurry to make our flight."

Will nods, standing and following Hannibal back out to the car.

Hannibal follows Jack out onto the concrete, eyes narrowed against the bright gleam of the sun off of the airplane windows and the snow-covered ground.

Will stops, his eyes wide as he looks at the thing. Hannibal pauses when he hears Alana say Will's name, turning over his shoulder to see Will regarding the plane with a mix of trepidation and shock. "Will," he says, and Will's eyes snap to him. He swallows, his face pale behind his mask. Hannibal smiles in encouragement and holds out his hand. "Come here."

Will ducks his head, his hair fluffy and wild in the wind, and puts his hand in Hannibal's, following close behind as Hannibal leads him to the ladder of the plane. Will follows, and Alana is behind him. Brian, Beverly, and Jimmy are already inside and comfortably seated.

Jimmy looks at Will and Hannibal with an expression like he's trying not to show any emotion, but his impassiveness is betrayed by the flicker of fear in his eyes and the way his lips press tightly together. Brian is not nearly as reserved. He almost flinches from Will as Will passes them, and looks uncomfortable when Hannibal and Will take a seat in the chairs on the other side of the aisle. The plane is set up so that it's two sets of four chairs, facing each other with a table between each set like on a commuter train. Hannibal and Will sit forward, mirroring Jimmy and Brian. Beverly sits opposite her fellow scientists, and Alana sits opposite Will, by the window and facing backwards. Jack finishes their quartet, sitting with a heavy sigh as the attendants do their flight checks and the door closes.

Will lets out a quiet, nervous sound. He's looking out of the window and has his feet tucked up underneath his chair, his arms pressed against the edge of the table. His fingers fidget, tugging at the sleeves of Hannibal's shirt.

Hannibal puts a hand on his back, gently rubbing up and down his spine. It seems to soothe him somewhat, enough that Will stops whimpering, at least.

Will puts one hand on the front of his collar, swallowing harshly like he's trying to fight back the stag and keep it in his chest. His skin turns pink at the neck.

"He gonna be alright?" Beverly asks, nodding towards Will.

Hannibal smiles. "Yes," he says, and Will swallows again, looking at him. His eyes flash and he clenches his jaw, nodding. He straightens up and takes a deep breath and puts both hands flat on the table in front of him, the picture of polite tension.

He doesn't want to make Hannibal look bad.

Hannibal's smile widens and he squeezes Will's shoulder in reward, before he withdraws his hand and settles down in his own seat. Jack seems content not to discuss the murder while they taxi to the runway and take off. Whether that is because he simply has no information to discuss, or he wants to wait until they're in the air, Hannibal cannot say. He doesn't have a folder in his hand.

Will remains quiet, his head bowed and his eyes closed as the plane rights itself on the runway and begins to gather speed. Jimmy and Brian have engaged in a conversation about a football game the previous weekend, and Beverly seems content to ignore them. Alana's eyes are on Will, tender and protective. Will's nails dig into the table as the plane starts to roar, and then the feeling of weightlessness overcomes them, and he opens his eyes and looks back out of the window.

He seems less afraid, more enthralled now, as the world falls away below them. It's night time at this point, winter making it dark before six in the evening, and the lights of the Baltimore airport are bright and twinkling, like a mirror image of the stars, as they shrink down and condense, and finally fall away as they break through the clouds.

Will sucks in a breath, and leans in close to the window. Hannibal tilts his head, wondering what he sees. There is a large swath of darkness within the lights, dotted only in two places with any kind of illumination. It's the Verger estate.

Will's hands clench up and curl. He shakes his fists and runs them down flat in a gesture Hannibal recognizes. *Master.*

"No," Hannibal says, drawing Will's attention before Alana can translate. Will blinks at him, biting his lower lip, and Hannibal takes one of his hands, forcing it back onto the table. "Not anymore."

Will swallows, and nods. He rests his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder, nuzzling there gently. Hannibal's fingers flex. He wants to touch Will again, curl his hands in Will's hair and wrap his fingers around the back of Will's neck. He resists, for the sake of their audience.

Instead, he closes his eyes. When he opens them again, he is not on the plane. He's not in his study either, but in the main foyer of the Verger estate. There is no one else in the room with him, not even Ichi or any of her sisters.

He folds his hands behind him and turns around. He doesn't see Will anywhere.

There's a great shadow at his side, and Hannibal stops, cocks his head to one side, and turns to regard it. A giant black spider sits, blocking the entrance to the corridor that leads to the bidding room. Its fangs are as large as a doorway, and even in the smallest of its eyes, Hannibal can see his entire body reflected back. It sits curled up, its large legs arching high, hairy as a tarantula, and curl back around like the spider is dead, but upright.

It doesn't move. Hannibal feels a prickle on the back of his neck.

He hears hoofbeats behind him, clicking on the marble floor. He turns, and sees a stag much like Will, but this one is pure white. Red blood runs from its nose and eyes, but it walks tall,

horns sparkling as though made of diamond. As it walks, it drips red onto the floor.

Hannibal steps back, and allows it to approach the spider.

He hears a sigh, and turns his head to see Will standing at the bottom of the grand, winding staircase. His eyes are on the stag, dark and sorrowful. Hannibal joins him on the stairs as the white stag approaches the giant spider.

"I'm worried for you, Will," Hannibal says. The stag is almost at the spider's giant maw.

Will smiles.

The spider moves, suddenly and swiftly despite its size. It rises up and leaps for the stag, covering it completely. The animal bellows, falling to the ground as the spider attacks, giant fangs parting and swallowing the animal whole.

"The worst is past," Will replies, his voice no less soft for the horror he's witnessing.

Hannibal hums. The spider has started to wrap the stag in a thick layer of webbing. "What am I seeing, here?"

Will shakes his head. "I think this is what you want to see," he replies. The spider stops, crawling around its conquest. The cocoon of the web around the stag is heaving. Hannibal watches as the spider splays its great legs out, large enough to cover the entire room. One of the legs goes above Will's and Hannibal's head, settling on one of the stairs behind them.

Then, a large stinger grows from its abdomen, and it curls around what remains of the stag and drives it into the animal's flank. Hannibal's fingers clench.

"You want to believe there is something more to me than what I am," Will says. The spider hisses, drawing its stinger back. It opens its fangs and looks about to swallow the stag again, but then there is another sound.

Footsteps, coming from the top of the stairs.

Hannibal turns, and Will does as well in a mirror of his action, their faces raised to see the demonic figure coming down the stairs. His horns are large, stretching up into the darkness of the ceiling. He looks three times as big as a normal man, and yet moves with the same quiet grace as Alana or Margot.

There is a groan, and Hannibal looks to see the stag moving, writhing around on the floor. Its horns penetrate the webbing, gleaming black now. The animal that emerges from the cocoon of torture and destruction is the one Hannibal knows.

He raises an eyebrow. "Do you think I imagine you as innocent?"

Will smiles, and turns his head to meet Hannibal's eyes as the demonic figure steps between them, his yellow eyes on the stag as it heaves and steams gently, caked in blood and sweat. "I told you," he says quietly, "this is how you see me. Human. Harmless."

"Or perhaps you simply do not threaten or frighten me," Hannibal replies smoothly.

Will laughs, light and pretty. He steps close to Hannibal and looks down the stairs, to where the figure has shrunk back to the size of a normal man. The spider is hissing, legs and feet pounding against the floor like it's trying to harm the stag again, but can't.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows and nods to the spider. "Is that meant to be Mason Verger?" he asks.

Will hums. "You have a rare gift, Doctor Lecter," he says. "Margot was never as good at figuring out my metaphors."

"Where our voices fail, we must rely on what our eyes see," Hannibal replies. Will smiles, and sighs as the demon approaches the stag. The stag looks at the demon, breathing heavily, and then lowers its head and puts his muzzle against the demon's outstretched hand. "You keep showing me things like this," he says. "Do I give off such an air of loneliness?"

"Have you ever not been alone, Doctor Lecter?" Will asks.

"I've been alone, and not alone," Hannibal replies. "But I have never considered myself lonely."

"Loneliness is like starvation," Will says. "Once you start eating, only then can you be aware of how hungry you are. In a more literal sense, I have always known hunger. I have always known loneliness. But…I find, with you, a possibility to finally be full."

Hannibal smiles.

The spider finally gives up with a hiss, turning its attention to the ceiling. It starts to climb and disappears into the shadows of the roof, still present, but out of immediate sight and mind. The demon and stag haven't moved away from each other, although now the stag's face is being cradled with both hands, its forehead pressed to the demon's coal-black chest.

"Mason Verger made you into this," Hannibal says. "Regardless of how you were born, or where you came from, he poisoned you and tortured you and the longer I know you, the more I find myself offended on your behalf."

Will smiles. "Again, I'm flattered."

"I think I would like to see him punished."

Will lifts his chin, his eyes flashing when Hannibal meets them. "I would, too," he says, and puts a hand on Hannibal's chest. His smile widens and Hannibal, for the first time in this mind-state, sees a flash of Will's canines, sharp and pointed as they are in reality. "We'll need Margot for that."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. He takes Will's hand in both of his and lifts it to his mouth, kissing Will's knuckles. Will's eyes drop to the action, he licks his lips and swallows hard enough that his throat clicks.

"I think that can be arranged."

Chapter 6

The man's body is suspended from thick ropes, spread out in a mockery of Christ on the Cross. There are ropes around his neck and his back has been opened like the original couple back in Baltimore, his eyes wide and staring down at the dirty mattress in the middle of the alley.

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. There's a lump of bloody flesh in the middle of the mattress. Beside him, Will lifts his chin to scent the air, and lets out a rumble that sounds almost hungry. Like a tiger when it sees a gazelle.

Jack is on Hannibal's left side, and Will is on his right, with Alana standing on Will's other side. Together it feels like they are the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, staring at Gabriel as he blows his trumpet to herald the end of days.

Jack huffs, scratching at the back of his neck. "Why Angels?" he demands.

"Perhaps he is a study of Biblical lore," Hannibal suggests.

Will hums and shakes his head. His hands move and Alana speaks for him; "It isn't Biblical. His Angels have wings. Angels don't have wings in the Bible, just in paintings and art."

"So, he's drawing from secular sources," Jack says.

Will nods, pressing his lips together. His mask is steaming in the humid air. It's cold outside, dark and cutting with the wind running through the alley. Will appears unaffected, but his hair is windswept and his cheeks are pink.

Alana sighs. "His mind has turned against him, and there's no one there to help," Will signs, and she says.

Their attention is caught by a surprised cry, and Hannibal lowers his head from the Angel to see Brian carefully picking up the wad of flesh from the mattress. He has a plastic bag in his other gloved hand and puts the wad in the bag with a grimace.

Jimmy looks like he's going to be sick. "Are those…? What are those?"

Brian grins, but it's uncomfortable. "Someone got an orchiectomy cheap."

Beverly raises her eyebrows and lifts her flashlight, revealing the Angel above them. It looks like he was a security guard for the building next door. Aside from the skinned back and rope burn marks, he does not appear injured.

"Doesn't look like the victim," she notes.

Jimmy lets out a wounded, high-pitched noise. "The Angel-maker?"

Beverly swallows. "He…castrated himself?"

Will straightens up, his hands moving rapidly. "He's not just making Angels," he signs, and Alana says, her brow furrowed. It looks like she's trying very hard to just focus on Will's hands, and not the scent of death and blood in the alley, or the dead man's ever-staring eyes. "He's getting ready to become one." Will pauses, catching Jimmy, Brian, and Beverly's looks. "Angels don't have genitalia."

"Save me a place in Hell," Jimmy mutters.

Jack huffs. "He *was* afraid of dying and now he's, what, getting used to the idea?"

Will nods. "He's accepted it. Or he's bargaining, offering his pound of flesh."

"Some bargaining chips," Brian says, smiling weakly at his own joke.

Jack frowns. "So…does that mean he's done making Angels? Or just getting started?"

Will huffs a short, frustrated-sounding growl. He touches his fingers to his forehead, then flattens them out. *I don't know*.

"I'm not sure Will has the ability to predict that, Jack," Hannibal says.

Jack growls. "Well, he's not just killing when he gets sleepy. How is he choosing them?"

Will ducks his head, looking nervous, and does the gesture again. *I don't know*. "Perhaps these kinds of questions would be better addressed to the man himself," Hannibal adds mildly, reaching out to put a hand on Will's shoulder.

Jack glares at Hannibal for a brief moment. "I'm asking Will," he says sharply.

Will growls, lifting his head. His pupils seem overly large in the low light, though Hannibal cannot say if that's a natural reaction to darkness, or if it's something of Will's inner monster coming out to play. His hands move very quickly but because of the way he's angled, Alana doesn't notice right away.

Will finishes the gestures with his palm pounded flat against his chest. He bares his teeth at Jack, and there's a moment of silence before he goes still, as if just remembering who he's speaking to – and growling at. His eyes go wide and he turns to Alana, shaking his head quickly and holding his finger to his lips.

Alana presses her lips together, and Will nods, and then his hands move again. She looks up at the dead man. "He's asking us to bring him the body," she says. "He can read it and see if he can get more information from it."

Jack frowns, before he nods to the forensic crew and they start to bring the body down. "That's not what he said first," Jack says darkly. His eyes are on Will and Will ducks his head, swallowing harshly. "What did he say?"

"Jack, it's not important," Alana says gently.

"What did he *say*?" Jack repeats, harsher this time. Will's eyes dart to one side and he takes a step back, like he's trying to shield his body with Hannibal's from Jack's gaze.

Hannibal hums, remaining silent. It's so strange, knowing how fierce and violent Will can be, and seeing him cowed at Jack's presence at the same time. Will has spent so long navigating people like Jack, and Mason, and Margot. He reads a room as easily as Hannibal might read words on a page, but Hannibal cannot tell if Will is playing up his submission and his softness to reassure Jack, or to appease him. If Jack dislikes Will, and doesn't find him 'useful', then it is possible Will thinks he would get sent away, back to Mason Verger. Navigating Jack is less a matter of friendship or ownership, but self-preservation.

Alana sighs through her nose, shaking her head. "He said you're in charge," she says. "And if you don't like his answers, you should come up with your own."

A stillness comes over Beverly, Brian, and Jimmy. Jack regards Will coldly, his jaw clenched and bulging at the corners.

Will steps forward, his eyes on Jack, shining in the streetlights. He circles his fist over his chest. Then points to Jack and fists one hand, lifts it to his chin and drags his thumb forward and under the center of his throat and chin like he's drawing an arc of blood spray, touching his ear lightly with his other hand. Then he makes the gesture for 'I'm sorry' again.

There's a moment of silence, Will's shoulders hunched, his eyes low but bright. He bites his lower lip and signs 'I'm sorry' one more time. Jack must understand the sentiment well enough, because he huffs and turns his attention back to the crew as they lower the body down to the mattress.

Hannibal takes Will's face, smiling in encouragement when Will's eyes lift to his. Will licks his lips and circles his fist in front of his chest again.

"I know you are, Will," Hannibal says kindly. He undoes the straps of the mask and slides it off Will's face, making sure to brush his thumb along Will's undoubtedly sore jaw. He cups Will's neck, threads his fingers through Will's soft curls, and rests their foreheads together. "Are you okay to do this again?"

Will swallows, closes his eyes, and nods. He opens his eyes again and smiles at Hannibal, letting out a soft purr. His nose brushes Hannibal's once, lightly, he touches his cheek to Hannibal's jaw, and then he pulls away and goes with Jack to the body as it's laid out on the mattress.

Alana slides up beside Hannibal, her hands in her pockets and her expression tight. "He got angry," she says.

Hannibal nods. "Most people who spend a prolonged amount of time with Jack feel frustration at one point or another," he replies lightly.

"I'm worried, Hannibal," Alana replies. "Will's anger is much more dangerous than yours or mine is. I don't want anything to happen to him."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, finding her choice of words interesting. "You and I are alike in how we regard Will," he says after a moment. "He is threatening, but we are not threatened. He is dangerous, but we are not in danger. And even with that, we both worry what might happen to him if he is threatening and dangerous to the wrong people."

"Not 'people'," Alana says darkly. "One specific person."

Hannibal hums, pressing his lips together to hide his smile. He puts his hands behind him, fingers of one hand circling the other wrist, and rocks on his heels. "I am so happy we share the same mindset, Alana," he says, and feels her lift her eyes to the side of his face. "Will is going to need friends. People he can trust."

"I'd like to be one of those people," Alana replies. "With your permission."

Hannibal's smile widens. "I cannot control who Will likes," he says. "Or who he becomes attached to."

"No, but you can control who he sees, and who he interacts with, and at what level and amount that interaction takes place," Alana replies quietly, her eyes riveted on Will as he regards the dead body impassively, his head turning as he rakes his eyes up and down it.

Hannibal hums, and walks forward with Alana so that they're standing by Jack, Beverly, Jimmy, and Brian at the end of the mattress. It feels like a strange imitation of a wedding night, watching the bride and groom go to their marriage bed as they used to in the old days.

Will swallows, and parts his teeth, stretching his lower jaw out and to the side so that it cracks. He licks his lips and kneels down, his thighs over the dead man's knees. The man had been tall; even at a diagonal he almost touches the edges of the mattress. His head is angled towards the impromptu audience, so Hannibal can see Will's face as he slides up the man's legs until his weight is sitting in a much more intimate place.

Jimmy makes a weak sound of protest. "He's compromising the crime scene," he complains.

Will lifts his head, an expression on his face that needs very little translation. Hannibal smiles, and nods when Will's eyes meet his. Will takes another deep breath in through his nose, closes his eyes, and puts his hands on either side of the security guard's face.

He bows over the man, his back heaving with strain, sweat breaking out along his neck and soaking his hair almost immediately. Below him, the dead man's eyes become focused, and he surges up with a broken cry. Will holds onto him tightly, sinking to his knees and gritting his teeth, his claws digging into the man's bloody hair.

The man's arms move, deadened with the weight of the ropes, but able to reach up and grab Will tightly. His back is open and exposed, his spine gleaming in the lights and the backs of his ribs blistered and wet. The blood on Will's hands is new.

The man shrieks like a demon, struggling under Will so harshly that, for a moment, Hannibal feels a genuine stab of worry for Will. But then Will's eyes open, wholly black, and Will snarls and wraps a hand around the dead man's neck and slams him down onto the mattress.

He puts his other palm flat on the man's skull and the man gasps, arching up, his teeth bared in a soundless cry, his eyes black and staring up at where he had been hanging mere moments before.

Then, Will stops growling, and tilts his head to one side. He pulls his hand back from the man's forehead and rests his other hand on the man's heaving chest instead, where the shirt has been torn and the skin is bare. He leans down, sniffing at the man's neck where the ropes are still sitting heavy and slick with blood.

He drags in another deep breath, letting out a curious, confused chirp. Will sits back, dragging his nose through the bloody clothes on the dead man's chest, and then he reaches the man's abdomen and his eyes widen.

Will jerks upright like he's been burned and the dead man starts to laugh. It's a chilling sound, and Hannibal can feel how his companions tense up. The dead man rises to a sitting position and puts a hand in Will's hair, fisting tightly.

Will bites his lower lip, his fingers shaking, and then the dead man jerks him close and Will reacts immediately. He snarls, slamming his claws into the man's chest and raking them down. His claws prove to be just as efficient and effective as the knife the Angel-maker had used to skin the dead man were; Will's claws shred through his clothes and into his skin and muscle. The sharp stink of a lacerated liver and destroyed intestines fills the air.

The dead man chokes, his grip on Will's hair falling and his mouth parted in a gasp. His eyes are wide, and they blink, fading from Will's black influence, to the green they were when the man was alive, and then finally the milky white of a corpse.

Will lets out a soft, shuddering gasp, his eyes fading back to the normal bright blue-green Hannibal recognizes. He stares down at the dead man for a moment, his trembling fingers sitting just shy of his clawed-out heart.

"Will," Hannibal says, and Will flinches, lifting his eyes.

Hannibal holds his hand out, uncaring for the blood and viscera clinging to Will's hands. Will's mouth is red, a smear of blood down his nose from scenting the dead man. There are lines of blood staining Hannibal's shirt at Will's back and Hannibal isn't sure if that's because the dead man hurt Will, or simply stained him – or, just as possible, the stag tried to get out through his back since the collar is blocking its normal path. He doesn't see any of the black ooze, but it's hard to tell in the low light.

Will looks at it, then shakes his head. "I need to go back in," Alana says, her voice soft and shaking. She looks very pale.

"Will," Hannibal protests.

"I need to go back in!" Will signs, his hands repeating the gestures with a lot more vehemence. Will's eyes flash, he lifts his chin in a brief show of challenge. Hannibal regards him, wondering which of them might break first. Finally, he nods, and Will's expression

softens. He touches his fingers to his mouth, uncaring for the blood, and then lowers them out to Hannibal.

Hannibal smiles at him, and Will blinks, his eyes fading to the black again as his pupils expand and overtake his iris and the whites of his eyes. Then, he breathes deep, touches the dead man's face, and lowers his forehead like he did with the woman at the BSU.

The man doesn't flail around and scream this time. He's silent, his hands flexing by his sides as his clawed chest heaves with another false breath. Hannibal can no longer sense Jimmy, Brian, or Beverly at his shoulder, but he can hear the faint sounds of someone retching at the entrance to the alleyway.

He smiles.

Will pulls back, allowing the man to slip into the afterlife for the final time. His eyes are glazed, his breathing and hands unsteady and shaking. He parts his jaws and Hannibal sees black behind his teeth, like his saliva has turned dark.

It drips out his mouth before he can swallow it back, staining the dead man's chest. Hannibal steps forward and takes Will by the hair and Will whimpers in protest.

"No," he says, and fits the mask back over Will's mouth. "You're done." Will's nose has started to bleed again, and when Hannibal turns his head to look into Will's eyes, they're back to their normal color, but black is beading at the corners like dyed tears.

Will whines, baring his teeth behind his mask, the black staining them at the gums and where his canines overlap each other. Hannibal sighs, and straightens up, gently helping Will to his feet. Will stumbles, his knees weak and refusing to lock, and Hannibal tucks Will's shoulder under his arm, allowing Will to cling to him as he guides him away from the mattress and the body.

Jack has his eyebrows raised. "Well, I hope you got something useful," he says, and Hannibal swallows back the urge to tell him to wait a damn minute. "Kind of turned out boy here into mincemeat."

Will shivers, but he nods. "He was alive when the Angel-maker castrated himself," he signs, and Alana says, coming forward to watch his hands move. She looks nauseous, unable to break her gaze from the smear of blood and black on Will's hands and face. "He watched, from up there, for hours while he bled."

Jack's eyebrows rise. "He was alive for that long?"

Will hesitates. "It felt like hours," Alana says. "I'm not sure." He looks back at the body. Strength seems to be returning to him. He can stand under his own weight and Hannibal lets him stand on his own, his hand leaving Will's hair and stroking down his back. "They fought. He was strong, he fought the killer."

"Not sure how strong a man dying from cancer could be," Jack replies.

Hannibal hums. "When we near our end, it is in those moments when our true strength is revealed," he says. "Your man is turning desperate."

"He's ready," Alana says as Will signs. "He won't kill again. He'll ascend. The next body will be his."

Jack hums, clearly skeptical. "Brian! Jimmy!" he barks, and Hannibal turns to see that it was Jimmy who had been throwing up. Brian has a hand on his back, soothing him, Beverly standing with her arms folded and her jaw clenched. Jack regards them, impatient and expectant. "Too strong for your stomach?"

Jimmy winces, shaking his head, and straightens up. "That thing," he says, pointing to Will, "is unnatural. He shouldn't be here, Jack."

Will closes his eyes, turning to press his forehead against Hannibal's chest. The black tears have fallen from his eyes and are pooling at the cheekpiece of the mask. He's still shaking, weak from strain. He curls one hand in Hannibal's scarf, smearing blood. Jack nods to them and pockets his notebook. "Get him out of here," he says crisply. "We'll handle the rest. I'll call you when we need you again."

"Alright," Hannibal says with a nod, and guides Will by the neck out of the alley. Jimmy recoils from them as they pass, and Brian and Beverly look similarly troubled. Hannibal can understand why; they are sheep, and sheep always tremble when the wolf passes by.

Will shivers, wincing. He touches his head, then jabs his forefingers towards each other. "His head hurts," Alana says. Hannibal nods.

"I'm reluctant to give him anything for it," he replies.

"Hannibal, this could be hurting him. Cooking his brain." Alana makes a frustrated sound, drawing her coat closer around her as the wind starts to pick up once they leave the alley and head towards the second rental car.

Hannibal knows that. He swallows back the urge to question Will and ask again how often Mason had Will do this for him. Knowing Mason Verger, he wouldn't have cared if using Will's abilities caused him pain. He likely delighted in it.

He wants to speak to Will, but again, finds himself reluctant to try and coax Will back into that mental place where they can speak freely. He opens the back door for Will and Will climbs inside with a heavy sigh, curling up in the backseat like a beaten dog. Alana gets in the passenger seat and Hannibal climbs into the driver's seat, turning the car's heaters up as high as they can go in an effort to provide some comfort.

"When we get to the motel, I'll leave and get us something to eat," he says. "And some new clothes for Will. If you wouldn't mind staying with him and making sure he gets some rest."

"Of course," Alana replies, eager to help in any way she can. Hannibal has always admired her selflessness.

He drives them to the motel that the FBI has rented for them. It is a plain place, neither low-repute or classy. They have three rooms – one for Alana and Beverly, one for Hannibal and Will, and a third for Jimmy, Brian, and Jack. Alana follows Hannibal and Will into their room and Hannibal removes his bloodied scarf.

Will hesitates, his eyes on the bed. He looks at the bathroom and points to it, then makes a gesture that mimics a shower faucet. Hannibal smiles and nods, and he takes off Will's mask and collar, setting them to one side as Will takes one of the complimentary towels and heads into the bathroom.

Hannibal waits until he hears the shower running, and sighs, sitting on the end of the bed he has claimed as his own, closest to the door. Alana sits on the other, contemplative and tense.

"I'm not sure if Jack is impressed or disgusted by what he's seen."

"It won't matter," Hannibal replies. "He'll keep using Will until he of no more use, one way or the other."

"I want to help him," Alana says, helplessly. "I don't even know where to start. Sometimes he seems fine, but clearly these abilities take a great toll on him. I don't know what would help." She looks to Hannibal, wide-eyed and hopeless, like he might give her all the answers. He swallows, looking down at his hands. They're stained with red from where he touched Will.

He stands. "I'll be back soon," he says, grabbing his keys and phone and sliding them back into his coat.

Alana nods, sighing. Hannibal gives her an encouraging smile, and leaves the motel.

When he's in the car, he calls Margot.

"This is Margot Verger," she replies on the third ring.

"Hello, Margot," Hannibal says. "This is Doctor Lecter."

"Doctor Lecter! What a pleasant surprise." He hears her moving through the hallway, her heels clicking on the floor, then a door shutting. "How can I help you?"

"I was hoping to invite you to dinner later this week," Hannibal says. "I would like to discuss Will."

Margot hums. "I'll bring Ichi," she says, "as a translator."

"I welcome Ichi's presence, but I actually have someone fluent in sign language who has been assisting me with Will while I learn."

"Oh?"

"Yes, a friend and colleague of mine. Doctor Alana Bloom."

"And she will be at dinner?"

"Yes." Hannibal smiles. "Right now we are in Ohio, but I suspect we will return before the end of the week. Are you free Saturday night?"

"Yes. I'll be happy to come," she says, and Hannibal can hear her smile. Then, she pauses. "Is everything alright with Will?"

"He hasn't tried to eat me, if that's what you're asking," Hannibal replies, his smile widening when he hears her short, sheepish laugh. It's apparently no secret that both Mason and Margot did not intend for Will and Hannibal to achieve any kind of harmony. Which is not surprising, given Will's nature when he'd lived with the Vergers, nor the description on his ticket.

"I'll see you Saturday, Doctor Lecter," she says warmly, and Hannibal bids her farewell and ends the call. He pulls into a strip mall parking lot, which sports a clothing store and a grocery store as well. He's sure between the two he will find what he needs.

It occurs to him, as he grabs a shopping cart and heads to the produce section, that Margot implied that she did not use sign language to communicate with Will. He remembers Will saying Margot did not have a penchant for metaphor. Which means he would go to Margot's mind like he does to Hannibal. Perhaps he and Margot have had private conversations as well, away from where her brother can touch.

He wonders if it's supposed to be a secret.

He receives a text from Alana as he's leaving the store that Will has finished with his shower, changed, and is resting. He asks if Will is asleep, and receives a reply that he is refusing to sleep, and wants to stay awake until Hannibal returns.

Hannibal smiles, overcome with affection at that. He pockets his phone and hurries to the clothing store, eager to return to Will for a reason he can't quite name. It's not protectiveness – Will can protect himself, and Alana has a gun; he isn't afraid for their lives. It's not quite eagerness either. Hannibal enjoys his solitude and even wandering the store he finds himself somewhat relieved at the lack of other people bothering him.

But Will's presence doesn't bother him either. His silence is refreshing, and finding new ways to communicate with him is an engaging endeavor. Hannibal purchases some sweatpants and t-shirts for Will, as well as a pair of tennis shoes that he thinks will fit, and some socks and underwear. It feels like another kind of hunt, a way to provide for Will that involves more than just fresh meat and a warm bed.

He drives back quickly. By the end of it, the silence is almost oppressive, empty without the shadow of the stag by his side.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal opens his eyes, shifting from a dreamless state as he feels Will's presence enter his mind. He is still asleep, he knows that, but when he turns around, the images in his brain revolve until he is sitting in his study, in his normal chair. There is a large fire burning and Will is sitting in the chair he reserves for his patients. In lieu of the couch, the stag is there, curled up as though in sleep. The demon version of Hannibal sits at the stag's flank, the stag's head in its lap and cradled in its clawed hands. Their horns interlink so closely that Hannibal cannot tell which belong to him, and which belong to Will.

Hannibal regards Will with a contemplative expression. Will meets his gaze readily, his eyes glowing a dull, icy blue in the firelight. Hannibal's hand flexes, feeling warm. He can register, absently, the physical feeling of Will's fingers laced with his.

"I find your presence calming," Will says, breaking the silence to explain himself.

Hannibal hums. "Were you having a nightmare?"

"Closer to a memory," Will replies. "But, perhaps, a vision. Of the future."

"Do you possess the ability to see the future?"

Will smiles, showing his teeth, which are human and normal in Hannibal's dreams. "No," he replies. "But sometimes my dreams have an unfortunate tendency to come to life. Spoken into existence."

Hannibal smiles. "But you cannot speak."

"Then, I think, that answers your question." Will's smile widens, and then he licks his lips and lets out a soft hum, flattening his hands on the wide armrests of Hannibal's chair. His knuckles are white and his hands look injured, like he's been beating them against a stone wall.

"I invited Margot to have dinner with us this Saturday," Hannibal says. Will hums. "You said we would need her, to shed some light on your past."

"Yes," Will replies. "She has a role to play."

"Implying that you do see the future, once again."

Will's smile widens. "I'm speaking it into existence," he replies coolly.

Hannibal looks to the stag and the demon. "I wonder," he begins, "where, in this place, your influence ends and mine starts. We seem to share a close connection, Will; you show me how you see me, and in return appear as how I see you. Where do I end, here, and you begin?"

"I suppose that answer lies where the id and the ego end and begin," Will replies. "Your innate desires and the ones that you pay attention to."

"You are remarkably well-versed in philosophy and religion," Hannibal says. "An awareness that I sense was not of Mason Verger's doing." Will hums. "Did Margot teach you? Or perhaps one of the siblings?"

"Neither," Will replies airily. Hannibal looks back at him. "When you do what I do, and see what I see, you learn a lot of things. It's amazing how many people turn to God or morality in their final moments. Some of them think of Angels, some of them cry out for Jesus. Others, still, rely on the pervasive idea that all men are created equal."

Hannibal's smile widens. "A mindset you do not share."

"Without context, I can't," Will replies with a shrug. "I know all men are not created equal. I am not an equal to true-bred humans. I am not your equal, nor Jack's."

"I don't believe that," Hannibal replies.

"Yes," Will says, smiling affectionately when Hannibal meets his eyes. "I suppose, then, that's evidence of where your influence sits in a place like this. You regard me as something other, but not lesser." He sucks in a breath through his nose and runs his hands from the armrest, down his thighs. "Again, I'm flattered."

"How do Margot and Mason Verger view you?"

"I think you know the answer to that," Will replies. "Margot regards me like a God; wrathful, but a liberator. She wants me to strike down her enemies. If she prays to me, and honors me, she believes that I will reward her when I come into my Kingdom."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Does she want you to kill Mason?"

"She told me, once, that when no one else will defend you, you must defend yourself," Will murmurs. His eyes are on Hannibal, but far away all at once. "Now that I know you, now that I have seen you, I sense your influence in her."

Hannibal smiles. "I consider her as someone worth protecting," he says.

"As do I," Will replies. He laces his fingers together and sits back, folding one leg over the other in a mimic of Hannibal's posture. "So what are we going to do about it?"

"We?" Hannibal repeats.

Will nods. "You want to see Mason Verger punished," he says. "For how he treats Margot, and how he treated me." Hannibal nods, for he cannot deny that. "I would like the same. The thought of drinking his blood and putting his neck is my teeth is very…enticing."

"He's healthy enough," Hannibal replies. "I think his meat would provide a nice meal for both of us."

Will smiles. "Then I need you to do something," he says, sitting forward and putting both feet on the ground, his elbows on his thighs. Hannibal sits forward as well. "Allow me to fortify this place. I will put up walls, and when we come here, it will be a secret place. Ichi and her sisters will not be able to penetrate it."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. The six sisters can read minds. "Are there pieces of your mind they cannot read?" he asks.

Will smiles, showing his teeth. "I build forts," he replies. "Compartmentalize. In a way only I can navigate." He pauses. "And you, if you want to see it."

"You show a remarkable amount of trust in me, Will," Hannibal says.

Will tilts his head to one side, his smile growing faint but fond. "I reflect, Doctor Lecter," he says. "I reflect what I see. And I see you. I see your darkness, your true nature. I can trust what I see." He clenches his jaw and his fingers flex, eyes sharpening. "Are you implying that I shouldn't?"

"I consider it out of character, given your history," Hannibal says. "You have had a monster as a master, and now you are under my care, and, although we don't like to admit it, I control your wellbeing and your life. What sets me apart from Mason Verger?"

Will smiles. "When a wolf crosses into another's territory, and they meet, they have two choices," he says. "They can fight to the death for the right to rule, or they can choose to coexist and live together harmoniously."

Hannibal nods.

"I don't want to fight you," Will says. "You are not a rabid animal, or a creature driven mad with mange. And neither am I. So," he spreads his hands out in an open gesture, "I choose harmony. I choose to be full and satisfied. There's no need to wage a war when something else threatens our existence."

Hannibal smiles. "Now, are we still referring to Mason Verger?" he asks.

Will huffs a laugh, his eyes bright. "One enemy at a time, Doctor Lecter," he says, his voice a low purr. His eyes rake over Hannibal, slowly, and he sits back again. Hannibal doesn't move. Will bites his lower lip and sighs, unlocking his hands to rub over the back of his neck. "Although, on that note…" He shakes his head. "I was out of line. Speaking like that to Jack."

Hannibal hums, sitting back in his seat as well. "You have an explosive anger," he concedes with a nod. Will winces, looking ashamed. "But I have already told you not to be afraid of or ashamed of your behavior. I consider it justified."

"You may be the only one," Will mutters, with the same darkness as Alana. Hannibal's smile widens. Will sighs and drums his knuckles along the armrest. "Jack cannot look at me as some kind of psychic and then treat me like a dog in the same breath," he says. "I won't stand for it."

"Neither will I," Hannibal replies. "Nor, I think, will Alana."

Will's lips twitch in a smile. "Alana," he says quietly, fondly. "I like her very much. How do you know her?"

"She was a student of mine, years ago," Hannibal says. "Now she is a leader in her own field of mutant psychology."

Will huffs. "We are no more or less broken than normal people, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal smiles. "I'm not really at liberty to say, one way or the other," he says. "I focus my work on a different kind of person. The kind that, when they do not have access to someone like me, they turn to things like God."

"The Angel-maker," Will says. "You believe you could have treated him?"

"He has a growth on his brain changing the way he thinks," Hannibal replies. "But there are others who commit similar acts, who do not."

"Do you think someone like Mason Verger could be fixed?" Will asks.

"I treated Mason in his younger days," Hannibal replies coolly. "Believe me, he was much worse."

"Why did you stop?" Will asks.

"Who says I did?" Hannibal says.

Will tilts his head to one side, frowning. "Do you consider him cured, just because he used to be worse than what he is now?"

"Truthfully, Will, I had little reason to believe that he was still as broken a child as when I first met him," Hannibal replies. "Until I met you."

Will hums. "And now, for my sake, you wish to see him punished," he says, repeating the words Hannibal said when he first saw the spider devouring the stag. Hannibal nods. "We must be very careful. Mason is powerful and surrounds himself with creatures designed to protect him. I could have killed him, you know. Many times. But I didn't."

"And why is that?"

"Margot," Will whispers. "If Mason dies, she loses everything. She needs an heir – a male heir – to take over the family estate. It's in their father's will."

Hannibal hums, pursing his lips in thought. "And how do you propose we rectify that?" he asks. "We cannot punish Mason and save Margot, as things stand."

Will smiles, slow and devious. "Margot trusts you," he says. "She told me I could trust you as well." Hannibal nods. "There is a fort in her mind, protected from her brother and Ichi. A gift from me to her. If she agrees at dinner, I will show you what's inside."

Before Hannibal can respond, the stag raises its great head and lets out a soft bellow. Will lifts his chin, his nostrils flaring as he scents the air. "We must go," he says, and stands. He crosses to Hannibal and puts his hands on either side of Hannibal's face, resting their foreheads together. "Wake up, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal startles to wakefulness, blinking rapidly as the ceiling above him comes into focus. His hand is warm, and when he turns his head, he sees that Will is holding his hand tightly with both of his, resting his forehead against the innards of Hannibal's palm. He's sitting on the floor like a child praying at his comatose father's bedside, dressed in a set of the clothes Hannibal purchased for him last night.

Will opens his eyes, the black fading away, and lifts his head. He smiles at Hannibal and lets out a soft purr. His hand touches his temple in a lazy salute that means 'Hello'.

Hannibal smiles, sitting upright. He turns his hand to cradle Will's spare one, cupping his free hand over Will's knuckles. They are not injured as they had been in his dream. "Hello, Will," he says.

Will's eyes are bright, there's no black ooze leaking from his eyes, nose, or mouth like there was the last times he tried to do this. He looks well-rested and happy, purring low in his chest when Hannibal, unable to help himself, threads a hand through Will's hair and pulls him up to sit on the edge of his bed.

"How are you feeling?" Hannibal asks, brushing his hands over Will's cheeks and jaw and through his hair, mindful of any soreness or strain he might be suffering. Will smiles, resting their foreheads together, and gives a soft, happy hum. He puts one hand on Hannibal's leg over the blankets and brushes his nose against Hannibal's, eyes heavy-lidded.

Hannibal smiles, understanding the sentiment – Will is okay, he's feeling fine. "Why did you wake me?" Hannibal asks.

Will pulls back, his expression fondly exasperated, and rolls his eyes as, almost on cue, Hannibal's phone starts to ring. Hannibal raises an eyebrow, but lets go of Will and reaches to his bedside table to answer it.

It's Jack. "Good morning, Agent Crawford," he says.

"Doctor Lecter, sorry if I woke you," Jack replies, and Hannibal sees from the alarm clock on the bedside table that it's just past six in the morning. An understandable time to be awake for working folks. In truth, despite how late it was when Hannibal and Will finally retired, Hannibal feels rejuvenated beyond measure, like he has had the most deep and restful sleep of his life.

"It's no trouble, Jack," Hannibal replies. "What can I do for you?"

"We got a DNA match off of the flesh left behind at last night's crime scene. An Elliot Buddish. He has a wife and family. Local."

Hannibal hums. "Will, Alana, and I can meet you there."

"That won't be necessary," Jack says, tight and quick. "I think, given the circumstances, it would be better if we were to keep Will's interactions with the families of killers and victims minimal." Hannibal frowns, but doesn't protest. "I don't think it will take long. We can handle things from here. I've scheduled the three of you for a flight back to Baltimore this afternoon. I've forwarded you the information already."

"…Alright. Thank you, Jack. I shall see you back in Baltimore," Hannibal says, and then Jack hangs up. Hannibal regards his phone, seeing a notification that he has a new email from Jack, and opens it to reveal flight details for himself, Will, and Alana, on a commercial flight. He huffs and meets Will's eyes. "Apparently you made a greater impression than I anticipated."

Will hums, and holds his hand out for Hannibal's phone. Hannibal gives it to him, and Will opens up Google Translate again. "His scientists are afraid of me," he types out, and the phone says. "And I made him look weak in front of his people."

"Two strikes against you," Hannibal replies with a nod. "And, forgive me, not much in your favor." Will frowns and cocks his head to one side. "So far all you have proven is that you can deduce characteristics of serial killers, but you could not give Jack a name, a location, or any information that would have reduced the body count or let him catch Elliot Buddish any more quickly."

Will lets out an impatient hum. "I said I'm not psychic," the phone recites. "I just tell stories. It's not my fault if the stories suck." Then, he pauses, heaving another frustrated breath. "I was right about him having a family."

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "You were."

"This wasn't a great audition," Will types out, shaking his head.

Hannibal smiles. "Thankfully your future does not hinge on whether or not Jack finds you useful," he replies. Will cocks his head to one side, eyebrows raised. "Legally you are my property, Will. Whether or not Jack makes use of you at the FBI is irrelevant in regards to your future way of life."

Will frowns. His fingers hesitate over the keypad, before he breaks gazes with Hannibal and looks down as he types; "And -." He pauses, deletes the words, and starts again; "If I don't work for the FBI, what will my purpose be?"

Hannibal shakes his head and spreads his hands out. "Anything you wish," he says, and Will frowns at him. "Congratulations, you are entirely without direction and purpose, just like the rest of us. Welcome to being human."

Will's mouth twitches, like he wants to smile but is too distressed to pull it off. He pulls his upturned hands towards himself and circles the 'U' above his other fist. 'I want to be useful to you'. "I need a purpose," the phone says, "otherwise I'm just a burden."

Hannibal sighs, shaking his head. "You don't need me for anything," Will types out quickly, holding up a hand to stay whatever Hannibal might have said in reply. "You don't need me for protection, and I cannot provide any service that fills a need for you. I can't do anything for you. How long until you realize that?"

He looks up, wide-eyed and nervous. He bites his lower lip and regards Hannibal expectantly.

Hannibal sighs, and holds out a hand. "Come to me, Will," he says, and Will looks down at his hand. He hums, setting the phone on the bed, and slides his hand into Hannibal's, his fingers curling around Hannibal's wrist.

Will's eyes go black, and Hannibal blinks, and he is back in his study. The stag and demon are facing each other, parallel to Will and Hannibal as they stand. When Hannibal lifts his hand to Will's face, the demon touches the stag in a perfect reflection of the action.

Will sighs, closing his eyes, and the stag bows its head.

"This is what I wish for you," he says, and Will lifts his eyes and meets Hannibal's gaze, something almost like adoration on his face. "To simply exist with me."

Will swallows. He looks down and raises his hands, turning them into fists, his thumbs pointing up. He presses his knuckles together like he's waiting for his hands to be bound. "A companion?" he asks, and looks up again.

"A companion, a friend, yes," Hannibal replies with a smile. "As you said before, loneliness isn't something you notice, until it is something you no longer feel. I had never considered myself lonely because there was nothing else like me. But you are like me. I see kinship in you, Will, and an opportunity for harmony; to sate a hunger I never realized was there."

Will swallows, licking his lips. His hands drop. "I can do that," he says.

"And you mustn't despair," Hannibal says. "Jack may not use you again, but there is still Margot and Mason Verger to attend to. Another grand design to construct and display."

Will's lips twitch, his smile growing when he realizes that Hannibal is right. "Yes," he says, nodding. Then, he smiles, and takes a step closer, resting one hand on Hannibal's chest. "I don't know if I can ever repay you for this, Doctor Lecter," he says. Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "I owe you my freedom, and my happiness."

"Do not think of this as an economic trade, Will," Hannibal replies. "I do not care for you out of obligation. You are mine."

Will swallows, and Hannibal is surprised to see a small tremor run through him. He pulls back and Hannibal lets him go, but the stag presses closer, its forehead touching the demon's chest. The id and the ego warring for action.

He tilts his head to one side. "Are you ashamed, that you enjoy my ownership of you?" he asks.

"Not ashamed," Will replies, ducking his head. His fingers twitch by his side. "Realistic." Hannibal blinks. "Alana will be visiting us soon. Jack will have called her next, so she knows she'll be flying us home."

Hannibal nods, accepting the change of conversational topic. "Yes," he says.

"I imagine commercial flights will be a lot less…accommodating," Will mutters.

"Yes," Hannibal says again. "We may have to crate you."

"Wonderful," Will says with a roll of his eyes, before he lifts them. He sighs and takes another step back. "I understand."

"I don't like it any more than you do," Hannibal murmurs.

"I know that," Will replies, "but it is just another reminder, I suppose." He shakes his head and looks away, towards the upper, shadowy levels of Hannibal's study. "There is something else I would like to discuss with you, Doctor Lecter."

"What is that?"

"You hunt for your food, and harvest the meat and organs you see fit to eat," he says. Hannibal nods, pressing his lips together. "What do you do with the bodies?"

"Discard them," Hannibal replies.

"Has this drawn anyone's attention?" Will asks. "Is there a possibility, however small, that a body I'm called to examine might be one of your design?"

Hannibal smiles. "It is possible, yes."

Will nods. "I will fortify that place. For both of us," he says. Hannibal cocks his head to one side. Will still won't look at him. "I won't betray you, but I want you to know that…a threat to you is a threat to me. I won't tolerate either."

"And what might you say, instead of the truth?" Hannibal asks. "The body you examined last night reacted very violently. Why is that?"

"Because it was fresh," Will says. "The fresher the corpse, the more life it still has within it." He heaves a breath. "And because there was a fight. The victim was still caught in its final moments, and they were not moments of surrender. That man was evil – he liked to…do things to people. Horrible things. I could smell it on him."

"His sin?"

Will nods. "Sin smells…like tar," he says. "Like coal."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, and looks at the demonic version of himself. "I must be coated with it, then," he says.

"As am I," Will replies. His mouth twitches in a smile. "It's not unpleasant."

"Why are you telling me this, Will?"

"I am simply advising caution," Will says. "And, perhaps, that you find a scapegoat."

"A scapegoat," Hannibal repeats. "Do you have someone in mind?"

"I think we both do," Will replies, his smile wide and sly. He turns his gaze back on Hannibal and meets his eyes readily.

Hannibal smiles. "You are a delightful creature, Will," he says. "I want to thank whatever happy twist of fate it was that collided our two destinies."

Will hums. "It wasn't a twist of fate, Doctor Lecter," he replies. Hannibal blinks at him and lets out a curious hum. "I cannot say for certain, one way or the other, but I think there is a web being woven, that neither of us have noticed. You say Jack asked you to purchase me at the direction of his superior." Hannibal nods. "Do you know where the intelligence regarding my existence came from?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "No. And Jack didn't seem to, either."

"Who might have known such a creature as me existed? And who would benefit the most, knowing that you might purchase me? Who made sure that I knew the ways of a man's thoughts, who knows both you and me and would have thought 'Now there's a happy pair'?"

Hannibal frowns, meeting Will's eyes.

"I didn't see it before," Will continues. "Mason Verger is a spider. His web extends far, and wide. But he is not the only Verger."

"Are you suggesting that Margot Verger planted your abilities in the FBI, hoping that you might be acquired by them, knowing that I was the only one with access to their auctions?" Hannibal asks, and even as he says the words, he sees the web of truth in them, as fine-spun as silk and gleaming like diamond. He smiles. "Clever girl."

"When there is no one to protect you, you must protect yourself," Will murmurs. The smile they share is intimate and secretive, like co-conspirators in a grand plot. "She told me I could trust you, but in that same action, she planted me in your field of vision, and you in mine. So that I could watch, and wait, and listen. And observe. And I think I understand how best to honor her, now."

"This plan would have relied on a great knowledge of our personalities," Hannibal says. "And, perhaps, intimate understanding of our true natures."

"No," Will says, shaking his head. "She doesn't know who and what you are."

"How can you be sure of this?"

"Margot exists in singular visions," Will replies. "She sees an enemy, and an opportunity. With my freedom, I am no longer under her or her brother's control. I have free will, as you said. And what I choose to do with it is my own decision. But I think she sees you as a confidante, and a friend. Someone who would be willing to help her if she ever asked." He pauses. "You know how she feels about Mason Verger."

"Yes."

"And you have done nothing. Neither reported her to the FBI nor dissuaded her from acting on her desires. I think she understands that, should the worst happen, you would be willing to turn a blind eye."

"She bought herself time," Hannibal says. Will nods, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "She needs an heir. Does she have one?"

Will smiles. "In a fort," he replies.

"Did you father a child with her, Will?"

Will huffs, laughing and shaking his head. "A mutant child?" he says, playfully disgusted. "No. Her father's will would not allow that."

The way he says it, Hannibal thinks she may have offered him the option all the same, in one of these secret meetings behind fortified walls.

"When Mason finds out, he may do something…drastic."

"Then we must act quickly," Will replies. He steps forward again, putting himself close to Hannibal, and rests a hand on Hannibal's chest. Hannibal is surprised by how harshly his heart is beating. "I ask for your trust, as I have given you mine."

"You have it," Hannibal replies. Openly. Honestly.

Will smiles, his eyes heavy-lidded, and he lets out a soft purr. "Thank you," he says. He lowers his eyes to Hannibal's mouth, and leans in, putting his nose in a gentle touch against Hannibal's jaw. His fingers curl. "I speak this into existence," he says. "Margot will flourish and prosper through our designs, and when Mason looks upon us, he will recoil as God has withdrawn from the Earth, when he sees what his creation has done."

Hannibal smiles, putting a hand in Will's hair and cradling him close, enraptured with the sound of Will's gentle purr. He feels Will smile against his neck, and closes his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

broskis i wanted them to make out so bad but it just *clenches fist* wasn't time yet.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> sorry this took so long! I was working on another one-shot and have gotten very busy at work so I don't have time to write anymore there D: I hope you guys like the chapter~

A flight from Cleveland to Baltimore is a little over an hour, barely enough time to serve a round of peanuts and drinks before the plane starts it descent. However, there is a hazardous wind warning in Baltimore as they begin to board, and so they are forced to sit idle on the tarmac for almost half an hour while waiting for the go-ahead from the Baltimore air traffic controllers so that they can take off.

Hannibal spends the time with Alana, trying to learn as many signs as he can. He is learning that signing is a very expressive art. It requires a lot of movement of the face, which feels somewhat unnatural to him, especially when he has spent so long and is required at his job not to give anything away with his face.

"You're a fast learner," Alana says with a fond smile. Hannibal returns it, and playfully signs 'Thank you' to her.

"I have studied many languages throughout my life," Hannibal replies. "It's about time I learned another."

She hums, and settles more comfortably in her seat. They're flying economy, and the fit is tight as everyone else starts to pile in and tuck their bags into whatever available space there is. They are on the two seats by the window and aisle of the plane, and there is a section in the middle for three seats, and then two on the other side. Hannibal can't imagine many people take this kind of flight, with this course, but the flight appears to be fairly packed.

He can't help but think there would have been room for Will, nevertheless.

Alana sighs, like she can sense his thoughts. "I hate that we had to crate him," he says.

Hannibal nods. The crating process had been a novel experience. Will is required by law to wear his mask and collar, and restraints around his wrists and ankles. Like a prisoner. From what Hannibal could glean from the timid check-in officer, he would be put with the more humanoid mutants in the front section of the cargo hold, away from the luggage. Hannibal had been required to fill out a form stating if there would be any 'risk' associated with transporting Will. He's not sure what kind of risk they might be referring to.

Will had been led away with a dog-man, a girl with eyes and teeth like a snake, and a younger male that seemed to ooze mucus whenever he touched something. Hannibal has no

idea what someone might need a mutant like that for.

"There are plenty of injustices I am only now becoming aware of, when it comes to his species," Hannibal replies coolly. He absently starts signing the letters of the alphabet with his right hand, as the flight attendants close the overhead compartments and prepare the plane for takeoff – finally. He hopes Will is doing okay. "I find myself insulted on his behalf."

Alana smiles, nodding in understanding. "As am I," she replies. "It's something I've been following, more or less. There have been several groups forming the past few years concentrated on getting mutants the same kinds of rights as humans. Or, at least, immigrants."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "Where would the law claim they immigrated from?" he asks.

"Don't tease me, Hannibal," she replies.

"I'm not," Hannibal says. "Mutants are born, as far as I've been given to understand. They are not made like some experiment in a lab."

"I don't think Will was born like that," Alana replies, turning and looking out of the window. "Or, at least, not the way he is now. I think Mason Verger did things to him; enhanced him in some way."

"This possibility distresses you."

"Shouldn't it?" She looks back at him, her eyes wide and her mouth tense. "What if he has a human mother and father? What if there's someone out there that would recognize their baby, and see what he has become, see him in a mask and collar and led by the whims of a stranger? How would you feel, if you knew someone had tried to turn your child into a monster?"

Hannibal smiles. "I appreciate your concern for him," he says, "even if you are implying that he isn't in good hands, under our care."

Her eyebrows rise. "*Our* care?" she repeats.

Hannibal nods. "I already told you that I would be more than happy if you were to take Will under your wing, as well as mine. He could use all the friends possible. I wish for you to be an intimate role model for him."

She smiles, her cheeks turning a little pink. She shifts her weight and folds her hands in her lap. "Thank you, Hannibal," she replies. "I do appreciate it."

Hannibal watches her for a moment, cocking his head to one side. "You care for him deeply," he says. She presses her lips together. "He told me he likes you. Very much."

"Oh?" Her cheeks darken. "When was this?"

"This morning," Hannibal replies. "He came to me in my dreams, so that we could speak freely." He keeps his eyes on her as the flight attendants start their safety announcement. Her

eyes are on one of the air hostesses, but Hannibal senses that's more so that she doesn't have to meet his gaze and not out of any genuine interest in the routine announcements. "Where does your moral opinion sit on mutant-human relationships?"

Her eyes flash to him, wide. "Why do you ask?"

Hannibal smiles. "Alana," he says, chiding.

"I don't want to sleep with him, if that's what you're asking."

"I am merely posing a hypothetical," Hannibal replies, cool and smiling, spreading his hands out in an open gesture. "I know some people buy mutants purely for pleasure."

She hums, jaw clenching. "Will was not created for pleasure."

"I disagree," Hannibal murmurs. "I think he brought great pleasure to Mason Verger."

She pauses, and then sighs through her nose. "He's attractive," she says, admitting it hesitantly, but Hannibal doesn't disagree with her. Will is beautiful, in his mind. "And his disposition lends itself to cultivate care and affection. Whether that's deliberate or not, I cannot say yet. I suppose, *hypothetically*, if I were to meet a mutant I cared for, and a relationship blossomed out of it, I wouldn't reject it simply because of how they were born, or made."

Hannibal smiles. "Well, if a relationship should blossom with him, Alana, I want you to know that you won't face any disagreement from my end."

She hums, and her lips twitch in a fond smile. She looks at Hannibal like he's a fool. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, in that regard."

"What do you mean?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head to one side.

Alana's smile widens and she puts a hand on his shoulder. "Will already knows at whose side he belongs."

Hannibal swallows, facing forward as he considers her words. 'Realistic', Will had said. He hadn't been ashamed, he'd claimed as much. Hannibal imagines that under his care, Will is soon going to lose the ability to feel shame. A warm feeling coils in his stomach at the thought of calling Will his.

"And what about you?" Alana asks, pulling Hannibal out of his thoughts as they taxi to the runway. Hannibal hums. "Where do you stand in regards to dating and mating with a mutant?"

He smiles. "I find the idea no more or less attractive than the thought of being with any true-bred human," he replies.

She laughs. "What a tactful answer."

"I am simply being realistic," Hannibal murmurs. "I have been a bachelor for most of my life. My relationships are fleeting, no matter how deeply and strongly they have been forged. I seek to be seen, and understood, by someone who sees who and what I am, and who I can see and understand in turn."

"An intimate connection."

"Yes."

"Will comes to you in your dreams," Alana says. "He can see into your mind. Do you think he has the ability to see and understand you?"

"…Yes," he says, his voice hoarse as the plane gathers up speed for takeoff. He wonders if Will is alright, down below. He hopes that the flight crew have been kind to him, and that the other mutants he's trapped with are not troubling him. He wonders if they can smell the monster lurking under his skin, if they're cowering in the corner lest he decide to harm them.

"I am your friend just as much as I am Will's, Hannibal," Alana says quietly. Hannibal turns to regard her. Behind her shoulder, the immediate presence of Cleveland melts away, quickly disappearing into fog and clouds. She smiles at him. "If you make each other happy, I consider it a great triumph."

Hannibal hums, unable to stop himself smiling. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves," he replies, just as quiet. He puts his hand over hers on his arm and squeezes gently. "After all, we're merely talking in hypotheticals."

The flight passes quickly and without incident, up and down as Hannibal had known it would. He and Alana disembark and fetch their bags, and then go to the mutant collection center next to where they put the oversized luggage and lost bags.

A young boy rushes past them, laughing in delight when one of the mutants – the dog-man that had left with Will – barks, his tail wagging wildly as he embraces the boy, licking his hair and snuffling at his neck. The boy's parents follow after, laughing and smiling as they go to the attendant and sign the form to check out their mutant.

The attendant goes to the dog-man and unhooks his leash from the thin metal bar that kept him attached to the wall. The boy takes his leash, grinning as he goes back to his parents. They all leave after a brief moment of reunion where the father pets the mutant's fluffy neck and the mother takes the leash.

Alana watches the exchange, one eyebrows raised, humming. "Do you think they're born with lower intelligence?" she asks. "Or do you think there's something in them that likes being treated as a pet?"

"There are humans who indulge in the practice without any mutant blood in them," Hannibal replies. "I find it strangely narrow-minded of you to imply that they have lower intelligence because of it."

She hums, rolling her shoulders. "I meant no offense," she replies. Then, she frowns. "I don't see Will."

Hannibal scours the long line of leashed and chained mutants along the wall. Will is nowhere to be found. He frowns and approaches the attendant as the man relieves himself of another mutant – a young girl with wide eyes being given into the care of an older man with a sharp smile and who smells of tobacco.

"Excuse me," he says. "I have a mutant here, coming from Cleveland. Male, humanoid. He was muzzled and collared."

The attendant looks at his list and raises his eyebrows. "Will?" he asks. He lifts his head. "So you'd be Doctor Lecter?"

"Yes," Hannibal says, nodding.

The attendant nods. His nametag reads 'Darren'. "He caused quite a disturbance in transit," Darren says, sounding aggravated. "We had to transfer him to a more secure holding cell. Come with me, please." He tucks his chart under his arm, and Hannibal and Alana follow him down the row of mutants, towards a strong-looking grey door.

"What kind of disturbance?" Alana asks, low and tense with worry.

"Unfortunately I don't know the details, ma'am," Darren replies. "But I was told he needed to be put under total lockdown." He swipes his keycard at the door and the light turns green, and he pushes his way inside. "This kind of behavior should have been warned about on his form," he adds, low and aggravated.

Hannibal hums, and files the man's name and face away. If he hurt Will, Hannibal will serve Will his liver on a silver platter.

The inside of the room is a series of cages, much like the holding crate that the Vergers had delivered Will in when Hannibal first bought him. Most of them are empty. The room is cold, and brightly lit – surgical almost. Hannibal swallows and follows Darren to the last one. "Sign here, please," he says, and holds his chart out to Hannibal.

Hannibal signs it, and Darren tucks the chart under his arm again. "There's a security detail waiting by the door," he says. "You'll be escorted out of the airport with them if you can get him calm enough."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. Then, he rounds the final corner, and sees Will.

Alana follows him, and gasps.

Will is…a mess. The front of his shirt is stained with black ooze, like he'd been throwing it up. His neck looks too thick in the collar and his mask is coated on the inside with black, and

cracked on the edges like Will's jaw had almost broken the thing apart. His back looks like it's been stabbed and Hannibal wonders if the stag's horns have pierced his flesh. But, as well as that, there is fresh, *red* blood on his hands and arms, shining in the brilliant light.

Will turns to look at them, his eyes wide and his hands shaking. He lets out a plaintive whine and Hannibal opens the cage door when he hears an electric buzz that means it's open, and Will rushes to him.

Will presses his forehead against Hannibal's collarbone, his fingers clawed and digging tightly into Hannibal's coat. He whimpers and pulls back and tugs on the mask with another desperate sound. Hannibal knows what he's asking for.

He takes the collar key and undoes it, and removes it and the mask. Will gasps, his nose bleeding black and tongue coated with it, and Hannibal watches as the head of the stag appears behind his teeth. He steps back, allowing the animal room to shred Will's flesh apart. The stab wounds on Will's back gape and widen, his flesh melting from him like slow-roasting meat. His teeth are sharp and long in the stag's mouth, the animal's great, hulking mass eviscerating Will's normal person suit with the same slickness as it had in Hannibal's backyard.

The change comes over him quickly. He had been fighting it back, unable to change because of the collar and the mask but the stag had been trying to come out anyway. Hannibal looks down at the mask in his hands, swallows, and vows that he will never put it back on Will again.

The stag bellows quietly, slamming Will's hands down on the ground as its hooves crack his knuckles and break them apart to make room. His joints click and rotate and set into place with loud, painful snaps. Then, the stag straightens, and stretches out its jaw to reveal the incredibly sharp teeth.

It lowers its head and Hannibal takes another step back lest he be speared by the animal's horns. The stag devours what remains of its human flesh, Will's eyes gathered up in its tongue and skewered, popping like overripe grapes.

Alana has a hand around her own neck, her eyes wide and sad when she gazes on Will. "Will," Hannibal murmurs, and the stag lifts its head and regards him with wide, black eyes. A tremor runs through it. "Will, it's alright. I'm here now."

Will had said his change is brought on by great fear, or anger. Hannibal wonders what he was afraid of.

"Will," he says again, and holds out his hand to cup the stag's slick cheek. The stag huffs, flanks steaming, and steps close to Hannibal, closing its eyes.

Hannibal does the same, and this time the transition to his study is jarring. The walls are out of focus and the fire flares brightly like it's been doused with alcohol. He looks around for the stag and his demon self and sees neither.

His eyes rise, and he sees Will, pacing the upper level of his study with a wild franticness, like that of a caged tiger close to feeding time.

There's human blood on his hands.

Hannibal folds his hands behind him and remains silent for a moment, letting Will stew and pace and calm himself down. Then, Will stops, just shy of the ladder, and regards him with wild eyes. "Hello, Will," he says.

Will's mouth twitches, like he wants to snarl. "Hello, Doctor Lecter," he says, and wraps his fingers around the bannister. His knuckles turn white and he looks down at his hands. "…Oh, *God*."

"What happened?" Hannibal asks.

"I…" Will swallows, bares his teeth. His eyes haven't moved. "I did something bad."

"Did you hurt someone, Will?"

"I killed her," Will whispers. He sinks to his knees and turns his back to the bannister, away from Hannibal. "I – I didn't mean to. But I wanted to." His hands slide through his hair, slicking it with blood. Hannibal hums and goes to the ladder, climbing onto the second level. He comes to a stop beside Will, and then kneels down.

He takes Will's face in his hands, surprised when Will fights him, trying to keep his gaze averted. "Will, look at me," he demands, and Will shivers, biting his lower lip and lifting his eyes. He threads a hand through Will's hair and cups his cheek, forcing Will to hold his gaze. "Walk me through what happened. I'm here now. Whatever you did, I'm willing to protect you, but you have to tell me what happened."

Will bites his lower lip and heaves a shaky breath, turning his head into Hannibal's palm. His eyelids flutter when Hannibal's hand tightens in his hair. "There was…this girl," he begins. He pulls his knees up to his chest and his fingers flex. "She was nervous, it was her first flight, and so I offered her my hand so I could speak to her and calm her down."

Hannibal nods, smiling affectionately at Will's compassion.

"She was…a seer," he says. "But not like a psychic. I showed her you, and Alana, and she showed me her master. She showed me things she's seen her master do, and I -." He closes his eyes, wincing sharply, hissing through his teeth.

"What did her master do to her?"

"Nothing. Not to her," Will replies. "She did what I do, but not like I do it. She can replay things she's seen, make the person feel like they're reliving it. Her master would hurt people, and make her watch, and then she could recreate the reality so that it felt like he was doing it over and over again."

"That's a powerful gift," Hannibal replies. Will nods. "Did you become afraid, and that's why you killed her?" Will grits his teeth and shakes his head, and Hannibal cocks his head to one

side. "…Was it an accident, Will?"

Will presses his lips together, heaves in a breath, and shakes his head again.

"She saw you," he whispers. "She knew what you could do. She knew who and what you were. I couldn't let her live after that."

Hannibal blinks, drawing back and crouching up straighter. He tilts his head to one side when Will looks up at him. "I told you," Will says harshly, "any threat to you is a threat to me, and I won't tolerate either thing."

"So you murdered a frightened child in cold blood, because you were afraid that she may divulge my secrets, deliberately or otherwise."

Will's jaw clenches, his face going dark and sad with shame. He draws in a slow, unsteady breath, and curls up tighter like he's a beaten puppy trying to escape another blow. He closes his eyes. "What happens now?" he asks. "I killed someone."

"Fortunately, the biased laws work in your favor," Hannibal says, standing. "A mutant killing another mutant is no more dramatic than a dog killing another dog."

Will huffs a defeated, angry breath. "Of course," he says. "I'm just an animal that hasn't been house-trained."

"You fit my house perfectly," Hannibal replies. That strange warmth is curling in his chest again. Will defended him, Will *protected* him, from a threat Hannibal would have never seen coming, and eliminated it because he *wanted* to protect Hannibal.

Hannibal turns back to him, and sees that Will hasn't moved. He's still curled up as though expecting a blow, his head lowered and his fingers nervously kneading at his thighs, his knees pulled up to his chest. "Will," he murmurs, and Will lifts his head, meeting his eyes. Hannibal smiles, and holds out a hand to him.

Will bites his lower lip, and takes Hannibal's hand, allowing Hannibal to pull him to his feet. Hannibal cups his face and brings them closer together and smiles when he feels Will shiver, hears how his breath stutters in something like anticipation.

"We should go," Hannibal says. Will blinks, once, slowly, dazed. "Alana is here with us, and she will be worried."

Will bites his lower lip and nods, ducking his head to rest against Hannibal's jaw. "What are you going to tell her?"

"The truth," Hannibal replies fondly. Will pulls back, frowning, and his eyelids flutter when Hannibal cups his cheeks and smooths his thumbs under Will's bright eyes. "You tried to comfort another mutant, and you saw something that scared you."

Will blinks at him. "You won't tell her what I did?" he whispers. "Why I did it?"

"I would never betray your confidence, Will," Hannibal murmurs. "And I would never let anyone threaten or endanger what was mine."

This close, he can see how Will's pupils expand and feel how Will's breath stutters again. He smiles, and doesn't let Will pull away. Will's hands go to his chest, curling loosely in his clothes, and Will leans in to rest their foreheads together.

Will swallows. "What does it mean?" he asks, whisper-quiet and sacred as a wedding vow. "To be yours?"

Hannibal hums, gently pushing one hand through Will's bloodied hair. "Would you like it to mean anything in particular?"

"I'm not sure," Will replies. He pulls back just enough that Hannibal can see his eyes. "But I think…if I did…"

"Yes?"

"I lack the context for anything like this," Will says, huffing and rolling his eyes. There's a ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "But the only thing I can compare it to is my own transformation. The stag or the human. The monster or the man. Yours, or not yours."

"You seek complete ownership," Hannibal says, and Will hums. Hannibal turns his head and sees the stag has finally made an appearance in his study. The horned man stands next to the animal and both of them are looking up at Will and Hannibal, as Will and Hannibal gaze at them in turn. One of the horned man's hands is resting on the stag's withers.

"I'm afraid that, whatever affection and whatever grows out of what we share, it will be possessive, and jealous, and all-consuming," Will whispers. "You may devour me, and I may let you. But both of us have horns, Doctor Lecter."

"Ah, but did we not agree to live harmoniously, in a happy coexistence?" Hannibal asks, smiling.

"As neighbors," Will says. "As companions." He turns to regard Hannibal again and Hannibal lets his head go. Will frowns and bites his lower lip. "I know it's not my place to demand it of you, but I have to say it." Hannibal nods. "If I am yours, then you are mine. Not unequal, but different. That is how you see me, and it's how I see you, and that is the only outcome I can accept."

Hannibal gives Will an affectionate, amused smile. "What would you do if I refused?" he asks.

Will swallows, his hands finding the bannister again, knuckles tightening.

"Are you going to refuse?" he whispers.

Hannibal's smile widens. He joins Will in gazing out onto the ground floor. The demon and the stag haven't moved. They're waiting, Will's and Hannibal's id and ego in complete stasis,

waiting for something to break and give.

Will lifts his head, sniffing the air. His jaws part. "We've overstayed our welcome, Doctor Lecter," he says.

Hannibal hums, and blinks, and comes back to wakefulness holding Will's face in his hands – his human face. His skin is wet but clean under Hannibal's touch.

He lets Will go and hears heavy boot steps approaching them. A security guard is calling and asking if they're alright.

"Alana, please get Will a set of clothes from my bag," he says, wiping his hands absently on his coat. Will shivers, curling up in a vague attempt to preserve his modesty while Alana obeys. She hands him a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt and he dons them in time for the security guards to round the corner.

Hannibal smiles at them. "Thank you, I think we're all set here," he says brightly, and walks out of the cage. "Come on, Will."

Will lets out a quiet purr, following behind. "Sir!" one of the guards says, and Hannibal turns. "You forgot these!"

He's holding Will's collar and mask in his hands. Hannibal's jaw clenches, and he shakes his head. "Those are the property of the airport," he says. "And, if I may say so, incorrectly applied. I have no need for them."

Will frowns at him, and Alana doesn't say anything as she hustles past the both of them and towards the door.

Hannibal gives him a warm smile, and holds out his hand. "Come to me, Will," he says, and Will swallows and steps forward. There's blood on his teeth and the insides of his lips when he grins at Hannibal. Their fingers interlace and he falls into step just behind Hannibal and to his right. They leave the airport under the escort of the guards, and get into Hannibal's car.

"Alana, would you be available for dinner Saturday night?" he asks, as the car warms up and he leaves the parking lot he'd left his car in. Alana had parked in another, closer to the terminal.

Alana hums, pulling out her phone and checking her calendar. "Yes, I'm free," she says. Will hums, leaning forward from his place in the back seat, his head resting on Hannibal's shoulder. She smiles at the both of them. "What's the occasion?"

"No occasion," Hannibal replies, "although I did also invite Margot Verger. I was hoping you might act as translator." He pauses, and smiles. "I think you'll like Margot. She was very kind to Will, and we consider her a friend."

Alana nods. "I'd be delighted," she says. Hannibal drives her to her car on the other side of the parking lot and she gets out and grabs her bag from the trunk.

Will lets out a quiet sound, and slides over to the back window, rolling it down and waving to get her attention. His hands move in a series of quick, graceful gestures, few of which Hannibal recognizes. He sees him sign 'Thank you' and point between the three of them a lot. Alana smiles, and squeezes his shoulder.

She goes back to the passenger side window and gives Hannibal a little wave. "I'll see you Saturday!" she says. "Call me if you need anything."

"We will," Hannibal replies, and Will purrs, smiling and much more relaxed since leaving the airport.

Hannibal waits for her to get into her car, and then he drives away, merging into the normal traffic. He feels Will gently nuzzling his shoulder over the back of the seat, and lifts his hand to curl it in Will's hair. Will's purr gets louder in his ear and makes him shiver, that now-familiar warmth curling in his chest, and Will reaches forward and flattens his palm over Hannibal's heart, patting him twice, gently.

Hannibal smiles. He knows what that gesture means.

Mine.

"Yes," he murmurs, his hand gently cradling Will's jaw, his fingers tracing the edges of his faint smile. "You are."

Chapter 9

When Hannibal gets Will home, they bring their bags in and Hannibal goes upstairs to his bedroom. Will follows behind, silent as he always is. Hannibal smiles when he hears Will take in exaggerated breaths of air, scenting the place that Hannibal calls his home.

Hannibal sets his bag down in front of his bedroom door, and turns to regard Will. Will meets his gaze steadily, his eyes a bright and lovely blue, and Hannibal smiles at him. He cups Will's cheek and Will's eyes flutter, going half-lidded, a low purr rumbling in his chest.

"Follow me," Hannibal says, and lets him go, leading him down the hallway to the guest bedroom. He had meant to personalize the space a little more for Will, but found himself lacking the time. As a result, the room is relatively barren. There is a bed with a thick, dark purple duvet cover and cream sheets, a closet made of dark wood, and a small bedside table made of the same wood. Blackout curtains cover the window and Hannibal turns the light on.

"Tell me if there's anything about this room you would like to change," he says, and steps to one side so Will can enter and look at it. "I promise to be much more accommodating than your previous host."

Will's mouth twitches in a smile. Hannibal remembers the clear cage he had seen Will in when he'd bought him, with a barren cot and threadbare blanket and thin pillow. "You may also use the bathroom across the hall as your own," he adds, and Will turns to him, smiling faintly.

Will licks over his teeth and clears his throat. He makes the same gesture as he had in the motel room, asking for a shower. "Of course," Hannibal says, and leads the way out of the room and to the linen closet next to the guest bathroom. "There are towels in here, and spare shampoo." There's also a spare toothbrush and tube of toothpaste, that Hannibal takes out and sets on top of a towel, which he hands to Will.

Will smiles, and signs 'Thank you' to Hannibal. Then he makes the letter 'C' with his hand and puts it in front of his chest, pulling it down. Alana taught him that gesture – it means 'hungry'. "I'll make you something to eat," Hannibal says with a kind smile. "Get washed up. I'll put the rest of your clothes on the bed."

Will nods, signing 'Thank you' again, and goes into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him with a quiet click. Hannibal does as he said, separating their clothes and putting his away, either designated to be washed or back in the closet if it was unworn, and places Will's things in his room before he goes downstairs.

He takes out a pair of bananas, some pineapple slices, and then a sealed pair of kidneys that he had in his stores. He breads and fries them, sighing and relaxed as he feels the sanctuary of his home and his kitchen return to him. The last few days have been tumultuous and somewhat tiring, and it's good to be home.

He will have to go hunting again soon. Perhaps Will might join him. Wouldn't that be a lovely thing, to see Will prowling through the darkness and ripping to shreds whoever Hannibal points him towards. His own personal attack dog, but also his equal, his hunting partner. Hannibal thinks about letting Will feast on the raw meat after he has harvested the organs he wants. He thinks about kneeling behind Will, petting his hair and keeping watch as Will wets his tongue and jaws with fresh blood.

He thinks about their last conversation. Will had spent the entire drive home purring in Hannibal's ear, touching his chest and his arm and nuzzling his shoulder. Will's affection, his desire for touch, is infectious. Hannibal feels almost fidgety without Will next to him, to cool the heat in his hands with his hair or his soft cheek.

He takes the kidneys off of the frying pan and lays one out on a plate for Will with a side of raw carrots and warm sweet corn, interested to see if Will would eat those as well. He reminds himself not to let Will eat the banana peels. Although, if it doesn't harm him, Hannibal doesn't see why he shouldn't.

Will is still showering – Hannibal can hear the water running upstairs. He wonders if Will feels unclean after what he did. He had been remorseful until Hannibal calmed him down, and Hannibal isn't sure if Will's remorse was entirely for the sake of performance. His motivations are anger and fear, but he is so astoundingly desperate for affection and gentleness as well. It speaks to a former life, Hannibal is sure of it. He is certain Margot will be able to lend some insight on the matter.

One thing is clear: regardless of whether Jack finds him useful or not, Will is his. Will is always going to be Hannibal's. But that means Hannibal is Will's in return. It is not an idea he rejects outright; already Will has proven to be a remarkable and promising companion to him. And Hannibal will admit he indulges in caring for Will, giving out kindness to the point where it renders him immobile. 'Kill them with kindness', isn't that the expression? Hannibal could absolutely ruin Will with it, if he so chose.

The water turns off and Hannibal hears the floorboards creak above him as Will goes to his room to dress, before coming downstairs. Perhaps Will is thinking the same thing. That was the original arrangement between them, after all; Hannibal will not mistreat him, and in return Will promises not to try and attack Hannibal.

But a web is being woven now. A spider sits in the center, and Hannibal is sure that it's Margot. The idea that she planted Will in his path is an interesting one, and one Hannibal needs to confirm one way or the other. If Margot is aware of her brother's more devious plans, she may feel threatened, and she could have chosen any mutant but she specifically chose Will. Because Will is different. Will is special. Will is perfect for Hannibal's way of life.

Will had said that Margot didn't know who or what Hannibal was, but Hannibal isn't sure if that's true.

Will appears at the kitchen door, his hair flat and dark with water, his cheeks and neck flushed from the heat of the shower. He smiles at Hannibal and Hannibal returns it, gesturing

for him to take a seat. Will eyes the food curiously, and takes a knife and fork when Hannibal hands it to him.

"Kidney, carrots, corn, pineapples, and bananas," Hannibal says, pointing to each thing in turn. Will hums. "I wasn't sure how hungry you were, but given that you've been reacting well to other foods, I figured we could try."

Will smiles, and tucks into the meat readily. Hannibal takes his own plate, leading the way into the dining room. Will follows quickly, his knife and fork scraping as he sets them down and carries them in. He has a mouthful of food, one cheek bulging, and Hannibal smiles when they both take their seats and begin their meal.

They eat in companionable silence, and then Will clears his throat and Hannibal raises his eyes. Will rubs his jaw and down his neck, miming the presence of his collar and mask, and lets out a curious sound. Hannibal hums, and nods. "I refuse to put you back into either," he says. "I have no need for them. I do not think you will ever harm me, and continuing to use them will only emphasize others' impressions that you are dangerous and wild."

Will frowns. He huffs a breath that sounds like 'But I am'.

"I had the thought when I first met you, and to this minute I still believe it; I want to teach you control, Will, not take away your need for it. You could have injured yourself terribly if the stag had kept trying to come out while you were still collared. I would have you learn how to swallow it back and keep it down, or let it free as you see fit."

Will swallows, and takes another bite of the kidney. Hannibal sighs, sensing his hesitation. "You cannot be my equal if I have to lead you on a leash through daily life," he says. Will's eyes flash to him, wide and nervous. "That is what you want, isn't it? To be my equal?"

Will nods frantically.

"Then that is what I demand of you. Control. Do you think you can achieve that?"

Will licks his lips, swallowing harshly again. He sets down his knife and fork and brings his fists together like he's waiting for them to be bound, thumbs extended. 'Companion', or 'Together'. He tilts them towards Hannibal twice and gives Hannibal a shy, faint smile.

Hannibal returns the smile. "Good," he says with a nod, and turns his attention back to his meal. "Alana and Margot will be joining us for dinner Saturday night. We intend to shed some light on your past, and perhaps on the whole circus of how you came into my care."

Will lets out an accepting hum. Then, he reaches out and touches Hannibal's wrist gently. Hannibal blinks, expecting to move into his study, but nothing about his surroundings changes. He doesn't see the stag, or the horned man, or feel any difference that means Will is pulling him into his own mind.

He raises his eyebrows at Will, and Will's smile widens. "Now that I know what your mind feels like, I don't have to bring you to me." His mouth doesn't move, and he doesn't speak, but Hannibal feels his voice in his head.

Hannibal hums. "Can you do this without touching me?" he asks.

Will tilts his head to one side and shrugs. "Never tried," he replies. "But probably. Eventually."

"Did it ever occur to you that this repression of your true nature, either self-inflicted or by Mason Verger's designs, has kept you from realizing your full potential?" Hannibal asks.

Will smiles. He moves his fork to his right hand so he can keep touching Hannibal, and eats as his voice fills Hannibal's head; "Many times. But I was also under the impression that my full potential would be a terrible thing to behold."

"I don't think anything about you is terrible," Hannibal says, and takes another bite of his food. Will has finished his kidney and moved onto the carrots, spearing each one and taking bites around his fork with loud crunches.

Will hums. "Well, I suppose what is terrible is a matter of opinion. People might think murder is terrible, if they did not appreciate the art and the beauty behind the action."

"Do you think that I am terrible, Will?"

Will pauses, his mouth full of corn, and then he swallows it and shakes his head. "I don't think there's any word that could describe what you are to me," his mind-voice says, as gentle and whisper-quiet as a church confession. Along with it comes a strong push of emotion, one that Hannibal is sure isn't coming from himself. It's affection and fondness, something frantic and savage tailing the end like the aftertaste of a sweet wine.

Even though it didn't come from Hannibal, he feels the answering heat in his chest coil and stretch like a sunning cat. Will's lips twitch in a smile and he spears a piece of pineapple, bringing it to his lips.

He smiles. "I have an appointment today," he says, and Will hums. "Is there anything you would like me to get for you, while I'm out?"

Will shakes his head. Then, he frowns. "I can't go with you?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles. "Unfortunately not today, my dear," he replies. Will swallows and lets out a quiet, hurt sound. He pulls his hand away and curls it in his lap and Hannibal feels his mental imprint fading away. His fingers curl more tightly around his knife and he swallows back the urge to reach for Will instead. "It will only be for a short while. If you'd like, I can see if Alana will take you somewhere, so you're not alone."

Will shakes his head, spearing another piece of pineapple with a little more vehemence. He spreads his hand out in a 'five', points his thumb to his chest and pushes it out. Hannibal knows that that gesture means 'I'm fine'. He sighs through his nose and finishes his meal, standing.

He goes to Will and puts a hand in his hair, kissing the top of his head. "I'll be back soon," he murmurs, and Will nods.

He starts to leave, only to stop when he hears Will's chair scraping back. He turns in time for Will to approach him and Will hesitates a step away, like now that Hannibal can see him, he must act carefully. He reaches out and touches Hannibal's chest, and then steps closer, his eyes lowered to Hannibal's neck and his jaws parted to show his teeth.

He lifts his gaze, swallows, and fists his hand in Hannibal's waistcoat. Hannibal feels frozen, intrigued as to what Will is going to do in the same way one might watch an oncoming car careening into one's lane. Will's eyes are dark, his pupil wide, and he swallows harshly.

"Will -," Hannibal starts, but falls silent as Will shakes his head and touches his fingertips against Hannibal's lips. Will shivers, bites his lower lip, and then pulls his hand away. He closes his eyes and leans in, resting their foreheads together, and Hannibal's hand naturally goes to his hair, curling loosely at the nape of his neck.

Will shivers again, gasping, and his nose brushes against Hannibal's once, briefly. Hannibal closes his eyes, tightens his hand in Will's hair, and closes the rest of the distance. Because he wants to. Because he can.

Will's lips are warm and sweet against his and Will lets out a shaky moan, pressing himself closer against Hannibal's chest. His lips part and Hannibal lets out a soft growl. He pushes against Will, turning them so that Will's back is to the wall and he can crowd and cover Will against it.

Will gasps, more loudly, and wraps his arms around Hannibal, his nails digging into Hannibal's shoulders. He's sweet and warm against Hannibal's chest, his kiss gentle. He tastes of pineapple and the spices in the kidney breading when Hannibal's tongue slips between his parted jaws. His sharp teeth nip *so* gently at Hannibal's bottom lip and he lets out a plaintive whine.

Hannibal pulls back for air, finds Will black-eyed and pink-cheeked. His mouth is red and wet, and he bites his lower lip and gives a soft whine, and Hannibal cannot help himself – he leans in again and steals Will's mouth in another kiss, his hand going tighter on Will's nape.

Will's mind-voice slams into his head, the oncoming car finding its mark. "Come back to me," he says, and Hannibal feels Will's desperation like his own. It is Will's need to belong, his need to be useful – but below that, simple and feral desire. Will wants him, Will *needs* him, and Hannibal wants to answer in kind so he does, cupping Will's tender neck with his free hand and pressing himself closer so that he can feel all of Will's strength pinned between him and the wall.

He pulls back to gather air and feels how Will's throat moves under his hand when he swallows. Will is gasping, his pupil overtaking his entire iris, but not the whites. He rests their foreheads together, delighted in how unsteady Will's breathing is, how fast his heart is racing.

He swallows, pressing his lips together when Will's eyes drop to his mouth. He pulls back a little more so he can see Will's face, and his hand turns gentle in Will's hair. He pets it back from his forehead and his other hand cradles Will's jaw, thumb tracing the edge of it. "I'll be

back soon, Will," he murmurs. Will swallows back his whine and nods, forlorn and full of sorrow.

His hands leave Hannibal's clothes, and Hannibal feels his presence fade away from his mind. His mouth is warm from Will's kiss and his lower lip is tender from Will's teeth. He licks his lower lip, tasting Will lingering there, and there's a hunger in his gut that he knows no food will satisfy.

It's all for Will.

"Do you remember my cell number?" he asks, and Will nods. "Good. There is a phone in my study. Call me and tap the receiver if you need me, and I will come."

Will nods again, his smile faint. Hannibal pulls away from him, surprised at how difficult it is to do so. He retrieves his keys and wallet and phone and puts them in his coat pockets, and leaves his house, locking the door behind him.

"You seem different, Hannibal."

"I'm sorry I missed our last appointment. I was out of state."

"Oh?" Bedelia arches an eyebrow and tilts her head to one side.

Hannibal smiles, his folded hands resting on one of his thighs, one leg crossed over the other. His eyes drop to the man curled up at Bedelia's feet. His name is Anthony, if Hannibal remembers correctly, and Bedelia purchased him after she was a victim of a violent attack from one of her previous patients. Hannibal suspects that she places him in obvious line of sight whenever he visits. "I have found myself in a partnership with the FBI," he says, and she hums. "At your referral, if I recall."

"Agent Crawford contacted me, yes," she says with a smile. "He wanted to know if I knew anyone with intimate connections to the Verger family. Your name was the first that sprang to mind."

Hannibal nods. "He asked me to purchase a Verger mutant for the FBI," he replies. "One that possesses unique gifts that they were interested in attaining."

Bedelia's smile widens, and she drops a hand to Anthony's hair, petting through it gently. Anthony doesn't move. He is a static creature, and hardly moves or speaks. He appears like a drone, dormant until his mistress comes under threat. Hannibal wonders if she uses him for other things as well. He thinks how Will would look with his jaws in Anthony's stomach and his claws wrapped around his throat.

"So you are a mutant owner as well," Bedelia says, her smile widening further to reveal her teeth. "Is that what you want to talk about, today?"

"I find myself in a whole new world, with all the navigations foreign to me," Hannibal says. "Will is…an intriguing creature." He pauses. "How did you come by your mutant?"

"Oh, I know a breeder in Italy," Bedelia replies coolly. "Anthony comes from a fine line of protective stock. Like pit bulls."

"You have owned him for many years," Hannibal says. "You are the only person in my life who has owned one for such a long time. Do you consider him like a pet, or a friend?"

Bedelia hums. "He is a tool," she says, her hand still petting through his hair. Her words and her actions are at odds with each other. "And if what you say is correct, Will is a tool as well. Has he proved useful to the FBI?"

"I think he scared them," Hannibal replies honestly. "But he seeks purpose. I want to give him purpose, but I am at a loss as to how. If Jack doesn't want to use him, then the responsibility of his usefulness falls onto me, and I have very little need for protection."

"But you do not refer to him as something to protect you," Bedelia says. She tilts her head the other way. "Do you see Will as a pet?"

Hannibal hums, and shakes his head. He lowers his eyes and sighs. "So you didn't know anything about him," he says, and lifts his gaze again to watch her reaction. "You didn't know anything about why Jack wanted to speak to me, why he might want someone at the Verger auctions."

"I would tell you if I did," Bedelia replies coolly. She stops petting Anthony and places her hands in her lap. "Is there something you'd like to ask me, Hannibal? More directly?"

Hannibal smiles. He has always liked Bedelia's ability to dance past his pretty words and see straight to the point. "I find an opportunity in Will," he says. "For friendship. For companionship. It is a need I did not realize was not being satisfied until I met him."

"I would advise you against getting too familiar, Hannibal," Bedelia says. "With Will, or with the FBI. I fear your inclinations may cloud your vision."

"My inclinations," Hannibal repeats, and he wonders if she's referring to the darkness she has seen in him before, or something else. He presses his lips together, thinking of how Will had felt under his hands and against his mouth. He looks away, and sighs. "I fear that may be difficult. My curiosity is piqued."

"You know what they say about cats and curiosity," Bedelia murmurs.

Hannibal smiles. "Yes," he says.

"Mutants are not your friends," she adds, somewhat coldly. "They are animals, Hannibal. Bonding with them leads nowhere. Even a house pet proves useful when the house is coming under attack, but otherwise they are simply indulgences. You cannot bond with a dog."

"I think human's evolution proves you wrong," Hannibal says evenly.

Bedelia regards him for a long moment, before she sighs through her nose. "You've already become attached," she says, like she's disappointed. "I didn't realize you had the capacity."

"Implying that I am beyond attachment?" Hannibal asks. "I have friends. I have companions. I have you."

"And I am a tool, just like your friends are tools to you. *Playthings*. And I know what happens when you get bored with your playthings, Hannibal."

Yes, he supposes she does.

"You are so certain that I am unattainable when it comes to mutual feelings of affection and respect," he says quietly, and meets her gaze with a steady eye. "I get the impression that I've offended you somehow."

Her smile widens and turns sharp. "I am the psychiatrist, Hannibal, and you are the patient here. Do not blur those lines, as you are so keen on doing everywhere else in your life."

"You advise caution," Hannibal says. "Restraint."

"Yes," she says. "If your instinct with Will is to take a step forward, I advise you to take two steps back. The same with the FBI. When emotions get involved, people tend to make mistakes. And unfortunate things can happen when people make mistakes."

Hannibal thinks of Will, and the girl he murdered on the plane. She made the mistake of trusting him. He thinks of Margot. Margot trusts Will, and she has a secret he is keeping for her. She may end up with the same terrible fate.

He swallows and drums his fingers on his thigh. His eyes fall to Anthony again and he nods to the mutant. "Do you trust Anthony to protect your life?" he asks.

Bedelia hums, her knuckles tightening in her lap. "I don't need to trust him," she says. "He is loyal to me."

"So you think these creatures can have loyalty," Hannibal replies. She nods. "Where does trust end and loyalty begin?"

"Soldiers are loyal to their generals and their flag. In the old times, people were loyal to a king and a crown. But the king would not trust just anyone to be his cup bearer." She pauses. "Even with me: you know that I will not speak of anything we utter in this room, because I am bound through loyalty to my oath to keep our conversations private. But would you trust me, if it was just me and you in a room and there was a threat on the horizon?"

"I trust you with my life," Hannibal says, and smiles, "because I have your loyalty."

Bedelia smiles. "Only through mutually assured destruction."

Mutually assured destruction. Isn't that the name of the game. "Will's previous owner told him to trust me," he says, and Bedelia hums. "Do you think that was a mistake?"

"A grievous mistake," Bedelia replies. "You owe no loyalty to anyone."

Hannibal's smile widens.

He purchases a cell phone for Will, and more clothes for him since the ones he bought before seem to fit him well enough. He will see about getting Will something finer, once he's confident that Will can suffer through a tailor without incident.

He returns to his home with his haul. "Will?" he calls, listening for movement. He hears Will upstairs, and then his light footsteps coming down. Will greets him with a warm, happy smile, and helps him with his bags. He purrs loudly when he sees that Hannibal has gotten him clothes, and gestures for Hannibal to come upstairs.

He leads Hannibal to the guest room, and Hannibal blinks in surprise when he steps inside. Will has pushed the bed to the corner and taken the mattress off of the frame, so that it's on the floor. His pelt has been removed from Hannibal's porch and splayed out across the mattress, and the clothes he owns have been piled in a makeshift nest. As Hannibal watches, Will removes the additional clothes and throws them on the pile, pushing them to thicken the walls of the nest. The blackout curtains have been taken down and added, as well as one of the thick blankets from the bottom of the linen closet, and the sheets and duvet.

He raises his eyebrows and regards Will when Will straightens up, purring and pleased. "Did you ever sleep like this at the Verger estate?" he asks.

Will shakes his head, his cheeks turning pink. He reaches out and touches Hannibal's wrist and his presence teases at Hannibal's mind like the brush of a cat against his legs. "I wasn't allowed soft things when I was there," he says. "But Ichi would let me touch her clothes sometimes. They were always so soft."

Hannibal smiles. "If I'd known, I would have bought more for you."

Will bites his lower lip. He steps close and nuzzles Hannibal's shoulder, his purr never stopping for a second. Hannibal finds that he quite loves the sound of it.

Hannibal swallows and takes out the cell phone, handing it to Will. "I have put my phone number in here, and Alana's cell," he says. "This way you can text either of us wherever you are, if we happen to be separated."

Will sighs, and takes the phone with a smile. He lets go of Hannibal's wrist to sign 'Thank you'.

"Are you hungry?" Hannibal asks, balling up the plastic bags to dispose of later.

Will gives him a fond smile and touches his wrist again. "You seem to be under the impression that I'm constantly starving."

"Well, you always consume what I feed you entirely, regardless of the hour or the last time you ate," Hannibal replies with a smile. "I imagine your metabolism is quite high, given the physical things you can do."

Will shrugs one shoulder. "I've gone a month before without food," he replies in Hannibal's head. "I won't starve. But…" He bites his lower lip. "I would like to learn to cook. I'm sure I won't get close to your ability, but it seems very calming. I'd like to learn."

And wouldn't that be a lovely thing, to have Will hunt with him, and then cook their meal together with Will's purr in his ears and Will's voice in his head. Hannibal smiles. "I'd be delighted to teach you," he says. "In fact, we will need to hunt soon, in preparation for dinner with Alana and Margot."

Will's smile widens. He touches his nose to Hannibal's jaw and presses a chaste kiss there. Hannibal turns his hand, catches Will's fingers, and laces them loosely.

"Tonight?" Will whispers in his mind, delighted and adoring.

Hannibal nods, and turns his head to kiss Will properly. "Tonight."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> So I got halfway through the hunt scene before realizing it doesn't make a lick of damn sense. So I'm asking for a little bit of suspension of disbelief, but it's a little lacking in Hannibal's normal precision. I blame Will :D

Will is tired after his meal, and Hannibal bids them both rest in preparation for their hunt, which will have to take place in the middle of the night. He bids Will go to his room and ignores the way Will looks like he wants to protest. He wants to be near Hannibal at all times, but it's important that he has his own space and Hannibal has his. Despite everything, Hannibal must acknowledge that Bedelia had made a good point; too much attachment to Will so soon, without knowing all of his secrets, could prove dangerous in the long-run, like playing a chess game with a wall between the pieces.

Hannibal wakes when he hears the sound of hoofbeats. They're slow, like the soundtrack is being played at half-speed, but steady. He pushes himself upright in his bed and tilts his head to one side to listen. They're coming towards his room, from the direction of Will's bedroom.

The stag. Hannibal wonders if he's dreaming, for a brief moment, but discounts it just as quickly. He knows when he is asleep, when he is in Will's space, and when he is awake and aware.

His door is closed, and he waits as the hoofbeats click steadily closer. They sound like the rhythmic drum of a rowing master on a great warship, each beat and echo given its due accord before the next one falls. He hears heavy breathing, the same kind as the stag makes when Will has just changed and is trying to catch his breath, but they're steady as well.

They stop outside of his bedroom door. The hallway is dark, so Hannibal cannot see the legs and shadows of the stag, but he knows it's there. The great animal's breaths are the only sound for a long moment, and then the stag moves again, going further down the hallway and breaching the stairs.

Hannibal stands and pulls his robe around his shoulders, sliding his feet into his slippers. He makes it to the door in time to see the stag's rump disappear down the stairs. He looks up at the hallway and sees small scratches in the paint where the animal's horns have marked it, and presses his lips together.

There's a small patch of condensation on his door, where the stag's muzzle pressed against it. Seeking, but not finding.

He goes to Will's room, first. There is blood on the sheets and the carpet, but not so much that Hannibal thinks he was shredded here. His eyes follow the line of blood to the bathroom, and the light is on. He pushes the door open to see that the bathtub is full of blood, there are handprints of red, smeared on the wall and the toilet seat, like Will had tried to catch himself and fell before he changed. The bottles of shampoo and body wash have been knocked over, there's a crack in the mirror from the beast's horns.

"Oh, Will," Hannibal sighs. He turns off the light and leaves the room, heading downstairs. The stag's hooves have left small, bloody tracks behind and Hannibal follows them. There's a smear from the animal's muzzle on the handle and glass of his sliding door which leads to the backyard.

He steps through it and his eyes find the stag in the darkness. The animal is standing utterly still, its eyes on the trees surrounding the back of Hannibal's home. Though in stasis, Hannibal gets the same feeling as when he's hunting, waiting for the opportune time to strike his prey and spear them in his own horns. He gets the sense that the stag is waiting for something.

"Will," he calls, and the animal's ears twitch backwards at the sound of his voice. The stag turns, a slow rotation that looks almost like a dance, and regards him with large, black eyes. Hannibal smiles, and holds out his hand, and the stag walks over to him, regal head bowed so that its cheek fits into Hannibal's palm.

He waits for Will's voice in his head, but nothing comes. Animals don't speak.

"Come back to me," he whispers, cupping the stag's face with both hands. The stag breathes in deeply, nostrils flaring slick and wide, and blinks. Hannibal sees Will's skin start to form over its fur and hair, hears his bones crack and retract, sees Will's teeth take over the stag's muzzle and swallow it back.

Will falls to his knees and Hannibal crouches in front of him, petting his slick and sweaty hair back from his face. Another pelt lays across Will's shoulders and Hannibal takes it, standing and spreading it across his patio chairs as he did for the first one.

Then, he goes back to Will and crouches down, taking Will's face in his hands. Will's eyes are clenched tightly shut, his teeth bared and his throat working to swallow the stag back and into his chest. He curls his fingers in Hannibal's robe and whimpers. He's trembling, not from cold, Hannibal understands that, but from something else.

Hannibal sighs and pulls Will's forehead to his neck, wrapping one hand in his hair and fisting tightly. "Come back to me," he says again, repeating Will's desperate words from their kiss the day before.

Will whimpers again, and drags one hand up to press his unsteady, gentle fingers against Hannibal's jaw. "I'm sorry," his mind-voice says, terribly quiet and scared. "I had a nightmare."

Hannibal hums. He pulls back and kisses Will's forehead, breathing in the scent of the cold air and the blood clinging to his skin. "Come with me," he says, and stands, guiding Will to

his feet. "Let's get you cleaned up." It will be counterproductive, he's sure, once he takes Will hunting, but for now he thinks they could both use the quiet.

Will nods, meekly following as Hannibal leads him back inside, closes and locks the patio door, and takes Will's hand, leading him up to his bathroom. Will's expression goes tense with guilt and shame when Hannibal turns the light on. Hannibal turns on the hot water in the bath, then pulls the tab that makes water come out of the shower faucet. He takes it down and runs it along the bathtub so the blood washes down the drain. Then, he plugs the bathtub and turns the water back so it's coming out of the faucet, and lets the bathtub fill.

"Climb in," he orders, and Will goes, head bowed as he steps into the bathtub and curls up inside of it, his knees to his chest and his arms wrapped around his shins. Hannibal busies himself while the water fills the tub with wiping down the rest of the surfaces with a towel, correcting the position of the bottles, and cleaning the mirror and the sink. By the time he's done and the bathroom looks somewhat presentable again, the water is up around Will's thighs.

He turns off the water and folds the towel along the edge for his knees, rolling the sleeves of his robe up to his elbows. He goes to the linen closet and takes out a washcloth and returns, kneeling down, and squirts some of the body wash onto the cloth, dipping it in the near-scalding water to bring the wash to a lather.

Will watches him the entire time, his eyes shadowed with darkness. His pupils are wide despite the bright light; the stag still stamping its feet and gnashing its sharp teeth in the corners of his mind. Hannibal meets his gaze and offers him a small smile that Will hesitantly returns.

He bites his lower lip and dips his head forward when Hannibal curls a hand in his hair, makes him bow his head, and runs the washcloth over his shoulders. Will's skin is covered in a fine layer of sweat and blood, and it runs down his body in thin lines, the water cleansing him, turning pink as his skin does.

Will reaches up and curls his fingers around Hannibal's wrist so that they can speak freely as he works.

"You made quite a mess in here, my dear," Hannibal says. "And in your room."

"I'm sorry," Will replies, his mind-voice curled up and purring in Hannibal's lap like a kitten, seeking his warmth and comfort. "I tried to control it."

"I know you did," Hannibal says. "What did you dream about?"

Will swallows. His fingers tighten and Hannibal sighs.

"This is the second time you have reacted negatively to me asking about your dreams," he continues, running the washcloth down Will's back, and over his shoulders again. He drags it under Will's arm, across his ribs, and Will straightens up to allow Hannibal to clean his chest and neck. "Are you afraid of speaking them into existence?"

Will bites his lower lip, raises his eyes to meet Hannibal's, and gives a single, slow shake of his head.

"Then what?"

Will hesitates.

"Will," Hannibal says, a little more sternly, "I would have you tell me. If it's something I can help you with, I want to help. And if it's something that will cause instances like this, I demand to know what it is. This cannot happen again."

"I know," Will replies, and then he lets Hannibal's wrist go so Hannibal can move towards the end of the bathtub, cleaning Will's arms as he goes. The water is almost too hot to bear but Hannibal doesn't mind if Will doesn't. His skin is turning pink and flushed, equal parts heat and need. Hannibal can feel it when Will touches his forearm where it's resting against the edge of the bathtub, pushing against him ardently.

"I dreamed about the spider," Will says in Hannibal's head. Hannibal blinks, and he sees what Will wants to show him – they are standing in an open field that looks a lot like the Verger estate, the stables in the distance and the large manor up on the hill. Will stands at his side and they are looking upon the giant black spider that is Mason Verger.

When Will speaks again, it is his normal voice and his lips move. "I dreamed we were fighting him," he says, and Hannibal hears the spider shriek, turns to regard the great black stag, and on its back sits the horned man. "But when it came time to charge, I hesitated."

Hannibal turns to look at Will, sees Will's eyes shining brightly, the same lovely blue as a cloudless summer sky. "He hurt you," Will says, and the spider leaps towards them, intent to devour them. The horned man falls and the stag retreats out of range, watching as the horned man fights the spider. The spider's stinger jabs into the horned man's stomach and Hannibal winces when he hears a great bellow of pain come from his likeness.

"He hurt me because you did nothing," Hannibal says, and Will's face is a mask of shame and anguish. He nods.

"I finally did charge," he says, and as he speaks the stag rears up, roaring loudly, and rushes for the spider. It lowers its head and spears the spider with its great horns, pulling it off the horned man and sending it crashing to the ground. The spider cries out as the stag rears back and sinks its horns into its bared belly again, legs curling up in death.

Then, the stag pulls back, watching the spider twitch and die. Hannibal approaches it and Will follows as the stag goes back to its master, licking the horned man's stomach wound with long swipes of its tongue.

In reality, Hannibal feels Will go tense, hears his whine of distress.

"Control it," Hannibal says, touching Will's shoulder in the vision and tightening his grip. "I am here with you, Will; you do not need to be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Will whispers. "I'm angry."

"Angry because Mason hurt me, or because you let it happen?"

"My master hurt you, and I didn't do anything to stop it because of Margot," Will says. "And then…" He turns to look at the spider, and Hannibal follows his gaze. The spider isn't black anymore, he notices. It's turning white. "I hurt her," Will whispers. "She got hurt because of me. Is this prophecy? I don't know. But I'm terrified, Doctor Lecter."

"You said you don't have the gift of prophecy," Hannibal replies. "You tell stories, Will. This is just a story – one possibility amongst many."

"I know that," Will replies. "But that doesn't stop me seeing it. I can't change it."

"And so you woke up, and the stag emerged, to what? Defend me?"

"I will always defend you, when I can," Will says. He meets Hannibal's eyes, open and honest.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, remembering Bedelia's words. "You said last night that you don't believe there is a word for what you feel for me," he says, and Will nods. "I'd like you to try to find one."

Will's lips twitch in a smile, and it's small but genuine. Hannibal blinks and sees his bathroom again, finds Will regarding him, calm and adoring. Will bites his lower lip and reaches out, water dripping from his hand, and gently slides his fingers through Hannibal's hair. It's cold when it runs down Hannibal's neck, and makes him shiver.

Will's mind-voice fills his head as he gives a low hum, resting their foreheads together. "I trust you," he murmurs in Hannibal's head. Their noses brush and Hannibal sighs, closing his eyes, leaning into Will's touch. "I find comfort in you. You calm and placate me in a way nothing else can. I would happily starve, or go without sleep, if it meant I could spend one more moment in your company."

Hannibal sighs again, opening his eyes. His free hand cups Will's face and he runs his thumb down Will's damp jaw. "Do you love me, Will?" he asks.

Will purrs, softly, and makes another gentle, happy sound. He tilts his head and presses his lips to Hannibal's in a single, chaste kiss. "Yes," he says, and Hannibal feels that push of warmth coming from Will that he is coming to associate with that love. It's heat, desire, need, comfort, all wrapped into one. Things Hannibal has not felt with such pureness and clarity since his youth. "There is my life before Mason Verger, and there is my life before you. There is nothing after. I don't want anything after."

No new King. No new crown. Hannibal smiles. "There will be no after," he says, speaking the words into existence as Will does. He flattens his hand on Will's chest and curls his fingers, feeling how Will's heart pounds against his touch like the organ is trying to leap into his hands for his own keeping. "I never want this feeling to burn out of you."

Will's purr gets louder, and when he kisses Hannibal again, there's a smile in it. He presses closer, the pink water splashing and moving around his body to make room. He cups Hannibal's head in both of his hands and kisses him passionately, and Hannibal answers in kind until his head feels warm and there is no more air in his lungs.

He pulls back and stands, taking Will's hands and helping him out of the tub. He takes another towel and wraps it around Will's shoulders, keeping him close as he dries Will off with long, gentle touches. Will's purr doesn't stop for a second, and he nuzzles Hannibal's mouth, his jaw, his exposed neck, free with his affection and his love as Hannibal takes care of him.

When Hannibal is done, he hangs the towel and cups Will's face. "Get dressed and meet me downstairs," he says. "It's time for a hunt."

Will smiles, and his eyes drop to Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal hums and kisses his forehead, smiling against his skin.

"Now, it is important to always decide the hunt with the meal in mind. We are not mindless animals, Will. We have evolved with the gift of thought, of planning and decision-making. Therefore, we need to know what we are going to make, and harvest the right crop for that meal."

Will hums, watching as Hannibal takes out his rolodex of recipe cards. He slides it over to Will and gestures for him to take a look through them. At his side, Will's phone sits so he can type out his words if Hannibal is out of reach.

Will thumbs through the rolodex while Hannibal takes stock of what is in his fridge and pantry already. His stores are getting quite low since he hasn't had time to replenish them, and he hums and considers that, regardless of what Will chooses to serve, they might have to take a significant amount of food from their pig for the night.

Finally Will lets out a curious chirp, drawing Hannibal's attention. He returns to the kitchen counter to see Will touching one of the cards. "Parmesan crumbled lamb brains," Hannibal reads off, then smiles. Will touches his wrist.

"Margot likes cheese," he says in Hannibal's mind. "My old master never lets her eat it, he says she'll get fat."

"A fine choice," Hannibal says, and takes the card from the slot. "There is some extra preparation when it comes to serving anything other than lamb. And you must never eat brains from a man or a cow raw, or you will get sick. Do you understand?"

Will nods.

"Do you know why?"

Will tilts his head to one side and then he shrugs, shaking his head.

Hannibal smiles. "For cows, it's simply because the animals have had too many diseases. 'Mad cow' was less of an issue in America, but it's best to stay away from them anyway. And the brain – or any meat – of a predator will taste different, and contain toxins that are harmful unless cooked out."

Will hums in understanding, before he gives a sly smile and points to himself, then gives a carefree shrug. "Well, you are hardly the average cannibal, my dear," Hannibal replies with another smile.

Will huffs a laugh. He grabs his phone and types into Google Translate; "Is it cannibalism if we're not the same species?"

Hannibal hums, amused and gentle. "We will need to move quickly," he says. "Butchering is a taxing exercise, and can take a long time. I intend to harvest as much from our prey as we can, especially if we only intend to serve the brains. And we will need to take the body back here, since I won't have my saw."

Will nods. Hannibal takes his coat and dons it, grabs his keys, phone, and wallet, and leads Will to his car. They climb in and Will slides into place in the passenger seat, curled up and eager. He's practically vibrating with anticipation, rubbing his hands over his jaw and neck like they feel too thick.

Hannibal reaches out and touches Will's arm. "You will remain as a man, tonight," he says. "If the body is found by the wrong people after the fact, they may make connections that we will have to deal with."

Will nods, pressing his lips together. He taps his temple. "I know."

"Excellent. While we drive, I would like you to try something else," Hannibal says, pulling his hand away and starting the car. Will hums. "I would like you to try and communicate with me without touching me. I'd like to know if it's possible."

Will regards him for a long moment, before he nods. He closes his eyes and tilts his head back against the headrest, heaving a great sigh. He becomes utterly still, hands flattening out on his thighs, the picture of relaxed concentration. Hannibal drives out of the parking lot and towards the highway. They will go out of state, to a rest stop, to find their harvest. Normally Hannibal hunts with a specific target in mind, but again, he lacked the time to really plan ahead, and they will need to be somewhere relatively remote if he is to allow Will to take his time, to learn how to strip and devour with precision and care.

He has faith in Will's eagerness to learn, but his abilities are rough and too primal to be at Hannibal's level of execution. Will is a quick learner; Hannibal has every confidence in him.

He drives for over an hour and a half, and Will is silent next to him. He can see, every now and again, Will's brow furrow, and Will sometimes heaves a sigh and leans forward, his eyes open and watching the road as he takes a break from trying to push his mind against Hannibal's. Hannibal allows him to, and each time Will needs to rest, he pets through Will's hair and gives him a soft sound of encouragement.

He understands that Will is trying, and that it must be difficult for him. But Will is going to learn – even if that becomes his only purpose, Hannibal will give him that. He will become the best and greatest creature to ever walk the Earth, the silent and deadly shadow at Hannibal's side.

He finds a rest stop that has no other cars and parks in the far corner of it, backing into a spot so he can see any car that comes in, and turns off the lights. The overheads don't reach them this far, and the trees are close companions at their backs. He makes sure to note where the CCTV cameras are, and where they will be able to hunt and gather out of sight.

Will sighs, settling down to wait. A few cars pass and don't stop, and Will huffs a small sigh, curling up in his seat.

Hannibal smiles and holds his hand out to cradle one of Will's, lacing their fingers together. Will's mind-voice slams into his head like Will had been beating against a door to try and communicate, and the door has finally opened, and he's fallen inside.

Hannibal winces and Will makes a soft noise, and his presence turns instantly soothing. "I'm sorry," he murmurs. "I've been trying."

"I know, darling," Hannibal replies, brushing his thumb over Will's knuckles. "Have you felt that you made any progress?"

Will shakes his head. "Touch is how I was evolved to see, and listen," he replies. "I think all this exercise has done is increased my desire to touch you."

Hannibal smiles. "Well, I won't complain about that."

"You delight in my need for you," Will notes. "You like how desperately I seek you out."

"It's nice to be wanted."

Will hums. "I feel as though I am crying out for God," he says, and Hannibal turns to look at him. "I cry, and I beg, and I beat my chest and throw my body against the ground, but no answer comes."

"Do you think I am some kind of God?" Hannibal asks.

Will's lips twitch in a smile, and he turns in his seat to regard Hannibal more fully. His fingers tighten between Hannibal's. "If you are, then I am your most loyal servant," he replies. "But you do not want me to call you 'Master', or my owner, or my keeper. You want me to be your friend."

"I want you to be my equal in all things," Hannibal replies. "Including, if it applies, being a God."

Will hums. Then, a beam of headlights passes over them, and Will straightens and they both turn to look out and see a small, beige-colored Toyota pull into the rest stop. Hannibal can only see one person inside – a man, in his late forties, disheveled and tired for the late hour.

He gets out of his car and Hannibal straightens up. Will hums, reaching for the door. "No," Hannibal says. He waits, and watches the man get out of the car, looking around himself, before heading towards the bathrooms. Then he lets Will go. "We will wait until he comes out."

Will frowns, but he must understand that Hannibal has been doing this for much longer, because he doesn't protest. Hannibal waits until the man is finished in the bathroom, and then he starts the car, keeping the lights off.

The man gets back into his car, starts it, and heads for the exit. Right as he is about to pass them, Hannibal revs the engine and pulls out in front of him, cutting him off. The man's brakes squeal and he gestures wildly at them, and Hannibal gets out of the car.

Will follows and the man rolls down his window, cursing at them. Hannibal reaches in with gloves hands and snaps his neck without ceremony, and then he opens the car door, pulling him out of the vehicle.

He deposits the man in Will's arms. "Take him to the trees," Hannibal says, and Will nods. He drags the man away and Hannibal puts the man's vehicle in park. He pulls his own car back into a parking space, and then gets back out, puts the man's car in neutral, and walks it down the small decline to another parking spot. He parks it and kills the engine and leaves the keys in the visor.

He takes the cooler from the back of his car, and follows the sound of Will dragging the body and finds Will a few trees in, as he dumps the man against one of the trees, breathing hard. His jaws are parted and his eyes are very dark. Hannibal sets the cooler down by the tree and takes off his gloves.

He starts to divest the man of his clothes and Will reaches out, a small sound of protest escaping him. He touches Hannibal's cheek. "Your DNA and clothing fibers might get on him," he says.

Hannibal smiles. "I know," he says. "Normally I have a plastic suit for this, but we won't perform the full harvest here. I have a plan." Will hums, pressing his lips together. "Do you trust me?"

Will blinks. "Of course I do," he says.

"Good." Hannibal takes his hand and kisses his knuckles. "Take off his clothes for me, darling."

Will nods, and kneels down, peeling the man's shirt over his head and tugging his jeans and underwear down, along with the man's shoes and socks and underwear. When he's naked, Hannibal gestures for Will to set the clothes to one side.

"Get the tarp from my car," he says, and Will nods and retrieves it. "Lay it out."

Will grabs the man's feet and Hannibal takes his shoulders and they haul him onto the tarp. "We will take a few things here," he says, "but the rest will have to be done in my home."

Will cocks his head to one side, letting out a curious chirp, but doesn't reach for Hannibal to communicate with him. Hannibal kneels down next to the man, wraps a hand in his hair and presses his nose to the man's forehead, breathing deep. He smells healthy enough, which is good. He wouldn't want anyone to get sick.

He takes his surgeon's kit from the inner pocket of his coat and rolls it out next to him. "Come watch," he says, and Will kneels down at his side.

"Things like the liver and kidneys are the first to spoil," Hannibal explains. He takes a scalpel from his kit and shows it to Will, whose eyes are dark and fixed avidly on it. "The soft flesh under the ribs is the best place to cut. From there, you can access all of the major organs. If we were only taking one thing, or anything other than the brain, I would do it here. But we will need everything we can get from the man, and that takes time."

Will nods. He places a hand on the back of Hannibal's neck as Hannibal makes the first cut. Blood spills out, already cooling since the body is so fresh, staining his hands. Will makes another worried sound.

"It's alright, Will," Hannibal says. He reaches into the man's body and finds the first kidney easily, wrapping his fingers around the organ gently and coaxing it free. He takes it out and Will hands him the cooler to place it inside. Then, he wraps his free hand around Hannibal's sleeves, pushing them up so they don't get stained.

Will's heat cradles Hannibal's side, but beyond that, Hannibal can feel how entranced Will is, watching him work. He is an admirer of Hannibal's art, a student of his work, and Hannibal can feel how much Will likes watching Hannibal harvest a corpse for their food. Hannibal imagines Will's way of doing it would be much less precise.

Hannibal buries his hands deeper in the man, humming at the slick feeling of blood and organs under his fingers. He sets the scalpel on the man's stomach and hauls the other kidney out and places it in the cooler. He takes a deep breath, then frowns. "We will leave the liver," he says curtly. Drinker.

He takes his hands out and Will sucks in a breath, and Hannibal turns to see him biting his lower lip, his eyes on Hannibal's hands. Hannibal smiles and lifts one to him. Will's eyes flash to his, wide and needy, and then he lets Hannibal's neck go and cups his hands, bringing his fingers to Will's mouth so he can lick them clean.

Hannibal presses his lips together, a tense warmth in his gut as he watches Will's tongue delicately curl around his thumb, dip into his palm, watches Will's lips part as he sucks his

fingers clean. It's obscene, almost erotic, and Hannibal's kills have never excited him, he doesn't get any sexual pleasure from hunting, but watching Will clean him is astoundingly intimate, and he finds himself transfixed on the sight.

Will's mouth is red when he's done and he licks his lips, sighing at the taste of blood on them. His cheeks are pink and Hannibal can feel through Will's hands on his own how much Will is feeling the effects of cleaning Hannibal as well. He wants to keep touching Hannibal, wants to put his mouth wherever Hannibal will let him, consume and devour whatever Hannibal gives him.

Hannibal's fingers curl and he brushes a hand through Will's hair. "You are beautiful," he murmurs, and Will smiles, closing his eyes, and lets out a soft purr.

"So are you." Will's mind-voice curls around Hannibal's brain, content and hot.

Hannibal swallows and pulls back. "Let's get home," he says. He directs Will to wrap the man's legs, and Hannibal does the same to his upper body, careful not to let any blood spill. They haul the body to Hannibal's trunk and put it inside, then Will retrieves the cooler and sets it in the backseat. They take the man's clothes and leave them in the trunk of the man's car and return the keys to the visor.

They drive away from the rest stop, hand in hand, with Will's purr filling the silence of the car.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> Okay so after a brief google search I realized Hannibal does NOT live in a townhouse, which is annoying because that's literally how I've always visualized it.
>
> Also I SWEAR the next chapter will have the dinner, I SWEAR.

Hannibal pulls up to the small driveway in front of his home. It's too small to park there, which is why he normally parks on the little median between his house and the ones opposite, but it will do for the quick movement and disposal of the man in his trunk.

Will gets out of the car immediately as Hannibal angles the trunk towards the side of the house. "Wait here," he tells Will, and opens the trunk as he walks down the small, gaited path to the side door of his house. It leads to a set of stairs that goes to his basement, and there is a small pin pad on the side of the door which opens to a code only he knows.

He opens the door and props it open with a brick, before he returns to the car. Will hasn't moved but his eyes are darting anxiously around, as though at any moment someone might happen upon them and see them move the body. The way Hannibal has angled the car, he knows that it would be virtually impossible for his neighbors to see anything. Besides, the hour is very late, and no one decent is awake right now.

"Will," he murmurs, drawing Will's attention. Will's eyes snap to him and he swallows, nodding, straightening in readiness. Hannibal takes the tarp-wrapped man by the shoulders and Will grabs his legs, and together they haul the body down the side of the house and into the basement.

Hannibal unwraps him and Will helps him carry the body to the very back of the basement. Lights flicker on as he passes, revealing his butchering dungeon. They go to the room where Hannibal will bleed corpses dry if he needs them to be, and Hannibal stabs meat hooks through the man's Achilles tendons without ceremony, so he ends up hanging upside-down. He places the tarp below.

He regards Will, and smiles when he sees Will lick his lips, his eyes hungrily fixed on the body swinging from the ceiling. "Now," he says, and holds his hand out to Will. Will steps forward and puts his cheek in Hannibal's palm, purring gently. "I want you to dissect this man. You will find all the tools you could possibly need in the cabinet over there." He nods to the cabinets, gleaming in the harsh light, at the back of the room. Will nods.

Since Hannibal is touching Will's skin, he hears Will's mind-voice clearly; "What will you be doing?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles. "I'll pack the kidneys and move the car, and then I will come down here and watch you."

Will's lips twitch in a smile, and he raises his eyes, his expression somewhere between playful and eager. Will nods, and Hannibal lets him go. He climbs the stairs and moves the brick so the door locks behind him. There is a second entrance through the floor of the kitchen that he can use. He parks his car and strips down the cover he uses in the backseat in case the tarp bleeds through, pleased to see that it looks like Will did just as good a job as he did when it came to wrapping the body. He gathers the sheet and cooler and carries them inside.

The sheet goes to the laundry room for later, and he brings the cooler into his kitchen. He dumps the cooler out and seals the kidneys in plastic so that they will keep, and places them in the fridge. Perhaps he will cook them for himself and Will for breakfast.

He takes off his coat and loosens his tie, sighing as he hangs the coat up. He starts to go to his bedroom and pauses, his eyes catching the trail of blood still lingering on the floor from when Will changed shape and fled outside.

Hannibal presses his lips together, sighing again, and resumes his journey. Luckily the only carpet he has to worry about is the one in Will's room, since the hallway and steps are wood, and the way to the patio had been clear. He will have to clean his bedroom and patio door as well. Thankfully, since it is Will's blood, it won't draw too much attention should anyone notice it – Alana won't ask too many questions, once she realizes what happened, at least. She is the one whose eyes are sharp enough to be of any concern.

Will had almost changed again, while Hannibal bathed him. His dream had caused him great distress – and Hannibal isn't sure it was distress over Margot, over the horned man's injuries, or some heady, equal combination of the two things. However Will feels, whatever confidence and strength he has, he is utterly terrified of Mason Verger. He fears what Mason did to him, and dreads the idea that Mason might still do something to him in the future. It is a weight that hangs around his neck, the albatross causing his ship to capsize and his lungs to be filled with water.

It is imperative that Hannibal help Will overcome this fear, so that when the times comes, Will does not hesitate.

He goes to his bedroom and takes off his suit jacket and his waistcoat, hangs up his tie and unbuttons and rolls up his sleeves so they sit above his elbows. He isn't certain if Will is able to take apart a man's meat and organs with the same precision Hannibal is, but Hannibal is also sure, in the same thought, that it shouldn't be too messy.

He rolls his shoulders and heaves another sigh. The hunt and kill had been relatively quick, and Will's mental bulldozing of his mind, however unintentional, means he has to take a moment in the quiet, to soak into the mindset of his hunt – and, more importantly, his gathering. Butchering takes focus and control, and it would be a great tragedy to lose any prime cuts of meat due to distraction.

He straightens up, and his eyes catch the dog whistle Ichi gave him, sitting undisturbed on his bedside table. He presses his lips together, and takes it. It looks normal enough, and Ichi had told him Will was trained to expect pain when he heard it – but not, necessarily, that it would cause him pain in and of itself.

It would be a good tool, to use in the name of teaching Will not to be afraid.

He pockets the whistle and goes downstairs, lifts the door in the kitchen floor and climbs down so that he enters the basement where Will is. The scent of blood and cold air on stone is strong.

There is a bowl at the dead man's head, slowly filling with blood from the cuts Will put in the man's neck, and his wrists, which are bound and hang down almost to the floor. Hannibal gives a pleased hum, proud of Will's natural ingenuity.

Will is standing by the table at the back of the room, the one in front of the cabinets where Hannibal places his harvest as he dissects so that his hands don't remain full. His head is bowed, his chest heaving. He looks like he's in distress.

Hannibal frowns. "Will?" he murmurs, gently so as not to startle him.

Will whirls around. His hands and mouth are redder than they were when Hannibal drove him home. So, too, is there black ooze between his teeth that wasn't there before. Will lets out a hurt, plaintive noise, his eyes wide when they meet Hannibal's.

"Control it," Hannibal growls. Will bares his teeth, canines flashing, but his throat is working harshly to swallow the stag back. Will leans back against the table like he needs it for support, his nails curling and the metal giving a dull shriek as his claws scratch it. Hannibal is reminded of how he'd looked in the bidding chamber, chained and snarling. He wonders if Will's stag had been in that room as well, only barely held back because of the mask, collar, and chains on his body.

Will whines, and Hannibal steps around the body and approaches him. He puts his hands on Will's cheeks and brings their foreheads together, and Will's eyes meet his, dark despite the harsh light. "I'm here," he says quietly, and Will presses his lips together. His hands don't move and Hannibal senses that it is purely because Will doesn't want to mark his clothes with the dead man's blood. He appreciates the thought.

Will swallows again, harshly enough that his throat clicks, and Hannibal feels a rumble in Will's chest as he seems to get control of himself, nostrils flaring, the black in his eyes beaten back and encased like his human skin over the stag.

Hannibal searches his eyes, and then he lets Will go when he senses that there is nothing more than the man looking back at him. Will presses his lips together, heaving a large breath through his nose, and bows his head.

He drums his knuckles on the table, gives a grateful-sounding hum, and turns around to go to the cabinets, where Hannibal said his tools were.

Hannibal rests against the sink bolted to one wall, where he normally washes his tools after he is finished. He leans against the edge and folds his arms across his chest, watching as Will prowls through the shadowy corners of the room, retrieves his larger and more varied set of tools, and places them on the table.

"What was it this time?" Hannibal asks after a moment.

Will straightens, and turns to look at him. He reaches out for Hannibal's hand and Hannibal shakes his head. "No," he replies. "You will learn to communicate with me without touching me, or you will find some other way. I want you to keep working."

He tells himself, when he sees the flash of hurt in Will's eyes, that this is for his own good. It's an incentive for Will to try, and to succeed. He uncrosses his arms and slides his hands into the pockets of his suit pants, fingers curling around the dog whistle lightly.

Will bites his lower lip, his eyes dropping. Then he points to the dead man, and taps his fingers against his forehead, then his eyes. Of course – Will touching the dead man would have brought him back to life, and Will may have felt his emotions and thoughts in his final moments.

Only, the man hadn't had time to be afraid. Or, really, all that angry. So why would Will react so violently?

Will pauses, and then he turns away again. Hannibal doesn't feel anything that resembles Will's presence at the edge of his mind, but he can be patient. He is not the one being robbed of connection, after all.

Will picks up a scalpel, first. He approaches the dead man with the scalpel in his red hand, and stands in front of it, gazing dispassionately at the pale hunk of flesh swinging from the ceiling. He takes a step forward and sucks in a short, quick breath, like he's steeling himself.

Then, he raises his hand, and makes the first incision. It's clean, a straight line right above the man's belly button, and not deep enough that his guts come spilling out. Will hums and slides the scalpel into the back pocket of his sweatpants and lifts his hands, his fingers gently pulling the man's stomach apart to bare the slick shine of his intestines.

Will lets out a quiet, rough growl, clenching his jaw and licking his lips like he's starving. The man doesn't twitch or move, his eyes don't open to reveal the blackness of Will's influence, and Will plunges his hand into the man's stomach and wraps his fingers around the man's gut, and starts to pull it free.

He walks it over to the table and coils it up, until it ends in a bloody mass of flesh at the bladder. The stomach doesn't come out, as Will twists the gut and cuts it with his scalpel so that what remains dangles over the man's chest like the string of a balloon.

Hannibal hums, and Will gathers up the intestines into a bloody pile and sets them at the opposite end of the table from the surgical kit.

Hannibal straightens up, slowly prowling closer to Will's back, as Will digs his red fingers into the man's cut and starts to peel his skin away from the fatty layer underneath. "Does it smell good, Will?" he asks. "Does it make you hungry, doing this?"

Will freezes, turning to look over his shoulder. His hand curls and he moves to reach for Hannibal, but Hannibal pulls back – Will must *learn*. Will's fingers shake and his eyes are wide, fearful of Hannibal's rejection, of failing him. He whines quietly and bites his lower lip, stepping away from the dead man so Hannibal can watch his hands move.

He makes the 'C' shape with his right hand, pulls it down his chest. Then, he points at Hannibal, and his lips quirk at the corners. "Hungry for you." Then, Will holds his hand flat in front of his chest and makes a circle with it. It's different than the gesture made with the fist – "Please" instead of "I'm sorry". Will reaches for him again and Hannibal cocks his head to one side, and lets out a low hum of warning.

Will's hand stops and he takes a step back, his shoulders heaving unsteadily and his hands fidgeting like he doesn't know what to do with them if they aren't touching Hannibal. He turns his attention back to the dead man and goes back to the process of skinning him by hand, harsher with his touches now, so that pieces of flesh come away with the skin.

"Will, you must learn to control your needs and emotions," Hannibal says. He takes his place at Will's shoulder, watching him work. Will's frustration and his anger are making him sloppy and careless. The man's corpse flinches wildly to and fro as Will skins him. "If you cannot get ahold of yourself, if you cannot speak to me unless I am touching you, you will never have agency and freedom of your own."

Will stops. His claws curl around the folds of flesh hanging from the dead man. He'd gotten to the man's thighs and just under his arms, and so the organs cradled in the bottom of his ribs, the meat between the bones, and the flesh around his spine is exposed and shining.

He looks at Hannibal, no longer panicked, but searching. Calculating. He tilts his head to one side and presses his lips together, before his eyes drop to Hannibal's pocket. Like he knows what's inside. Perhaps he does.

Will nods – once, sharply, and then goes back to skinning the man. Despite his calm and focused expression, his hands move with jitters and franticness. Hannibal sighs, and finally relents – he puts a hand in Will's hair and Will immediately goes still, gasping, his eyes closing as he falls to his knees between Hannibal and the dead man.

Hannibal blinks, and he is abruptly in his study. Will paces the floor in front of the fire and whirls on him when Hannibal rights himself, like he had been waiting for Hannibal to arrive.

"You're a cruel man," Will says, his pacing belying the calm way in which he speaks. He's even smiling, weak with relief that Hannibal is touching him. Hannibal flexes his fingers, clenches his grip in Will's soft hair, and the Will in his study trembles, his eyelids fluttering and his jaw clenching as he growls in pleasure.

"Sometimes it is only through cruelty that we can see and achieve our full potential," Hannibal replies, and thinks briefly of Mischa.

"Violence and cruelty is not the only thing that guides and controls us, Doctor Lecter," Will whispers.

Hannibal smiles. "No," he concedes. "But out of the brightest and most violent fires come the most powerful phoenixes."

Will regards him. He steps forward until he is away from the fire, and standing in front of Hannibal. He moves swiftly in Hannibal's mind, away in one instant and then here the next. "And that is what you see me as," Will says. "A phoenix. Some creature with a past of innocence and diamond that has turned to darkness and coal."

Hannibal smiles. "If you mean to suggest that I see you as of lesser value than whatever it is you were, I would tell you you're wrong." Will hums, pressing his lips together. He bows his head and rests his forehead on Hannibal's shoulder.

"I'm trying," he says, plaintive and quiet. Hannibal cups his hand around Will's nape and likes how Will shivers against him, pressing closer in his mind. "I swear I'm trying. It's hard. I feel like I'm screaming your name in a fog but I don't know which way is North, I don't know which way to run to you, and my own voice keeps echoing back at me because there is no one else to hear it."

"Perhaps it would be beneficial to you, then, if I could create a call of my own," Hannibal replies. "Then we could find each other in the dark."

Will pulls back, frowning up at him. "I don't know how to do that," he says.

Hannibal hums, and looks around. The stag and the horned man are nowhere to be found. "You said that this place was where our minds could overlap," he says, and Will nods. "In this room, my consciousness affects how you appear, and your consciousness affects what I see. But you have taken me other places. You have taken me to your dreams, and found your way into mine."

"Yes," Will says with a nod.

"You said you build forts," Hannibal adds, and Will nods again. "You can build them anywhere? Around any piece of my mind?"

"Yes," Will replies. "If I saw it."

Hannibal nods, smiling, and reaches out for Will's hand. "Come with me," he says, and Will looks at his hand, and takes it, his palm sliding dry and warm into Hannibal's. Hannibal closes his eyes and steps into the foyer of his own palace, where the golden angels of the Cathedral in Palermo greet him. The white stone arches and beautiful sanctuaries and sacristies sit along every edge.

Then, before the altar, in front of the stairs, he brings Will to the single reminder of Death in the Cathedral. The skull is grinning, its hands clasped in prayer but its face turned away. He smiles, and lifts his eyes to regard Will, and lets his hand go.

"The next time you try," Hannibal says, "come to this place. Come to this place and call for me."

Will raises his eyes, looking around with awe at the beautifully shining effigies and tributes to the great Christian legacy. His eyes are wide and shining and he gasps, before his gaze settles on the altar. "Where are we?" he whispers.

"It's the Palermo Cathedral, in Sicily," Hannibal replies. "This is one of my favorite places in the world."

Will regards him, looking at Hannibal like he has just been shown the most beautiful piece of art, heard the most moving song in the world. He steps into Hannibal's space and cups Hannibal's jaw, pulling him into a passionate but chaste kiss. Hannibal can feel the real warmth of Will doing the same in the physical space of his basement.

He blinks, and opens his eyes, and Will's hands are suddenly slick with blood and on his skin. Will gasps, whining for another kiss and Hannibal meets him – his hand is still in Will's hair and he forces Will tighter to him, wraps his free hand in Will's shirt and twists it until Will shivers in the cool air as the skin on his belly is exposed.

"I saw something else," Will's mind-voice says, as he breaks the kiss but keeps his fingers on Hannibal's jaw. "I saw the dead man's mind – it was so fresh, I could even talk to him for a little while."

"What did he say?"

"The girl I killed," Will whispers, wincing and pressing his lips together. "The one on the plane – she was his. He had been coming to Maryland to buy her."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows, remembering the man's beaten-up car and the sorry state of his clothes. "I doubt he could afford a mutant," he replies.

Will sucks in a breath, shaking his head. "You're missing the point," he says, the presence of his voice rubbing against Hannibal's mind like an agitated cat. "It's too much of a coincidence. Why would I be on the same plane as a girl whose next master we ended up killing?"

"Will, it's alright," Hannibal says coolly. He takes Will's hands in his own and gently pulls them away from his face. Will regards him like he's lost his mind, unsure and wide-eyed. "These are questions we cannot possibly answer."

Will bares his teeth, his fingers curling within Hannibal's. "I smell a spider," his mind-voice growls. "Or a rat."

"Are you worried that someone will come looking for him?" Hannibal asks.

Will shakes his head. "No. He told no one he was coming here." His mouth twitches. "Unfortunately for him." Then he licks his lips and lets out another harried, soft sound. "We need to call Jack. We need to tell him what I did."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows. "That may not put you in Jack's good graces," he warns.

Will nods. "You have to. I need to meet the man who owned that girl."

"Why?"

Will pulls back and shakes his head, licking his lips. Hannibal lets his hands go and Will turns back to the dead man. He peels and tugs the rest of the skin from his flesh, slower and more deliberate now, until he cuts a ring around the man's neck and wrists and frees him of his skin from neck to stomach. He deposits the pile of skin on the tarp next to the bowl of blood.

"Will," Hannibal presses, taking a step back to allow Will to work. Will hums. "Why do you need to meet this man? Do you feel like you will know him?"

Will looks at Hannibal, his eyes flashing. He taps his fingers against his forehead, smearing blood, and then extends his forefinger and draws the question mark symbol in front of him. His finger jabs the dot at the bottom sharply and he huffs when he ends up poking the dead man's ribs. The blood on Hannibal's skin is starting to dry and itch.

"You have questions for him?" Hannibal guesses, and Will smiles and nods. "Do you think this man will still be in Baltimore, since he has no mutant to sell anymore?"

Will huffs, and gives Hannibal a fond expression. Of course – who wouldn't want to exact revenge on the thing that slaughtered their pet? And even more so, if it were to threaten the ability for great profit? Hannibal will admit he would do very discourteous things to anyone who laid the wrong kind of hand on Will – and he intends to, in the form of Mason Verger's downfall.

"Let's finish up here," he says, and nods to the dead man. Will hums and turns his attention back to it. "And then I'll see what we can do about facilitating a meeting with Jack."

Will smiles, his fingers crawling up the dead man's ribs, holding him on either side. He starts to hum, and though he cannot change the pitch with his ruined throat, Hannibal recognizes the rhythm of 'Itsy Bitsy Spider'. His smile widens.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> I know I said in the last chapter that this one will have the dinner and I'm sorry I lied!! I kind of.....lost momentum with this fic and I had to get it back. But you get some cuddling and Will being a lil marshmallow so I hope that makes up for it!! And cooking lessons!

The next morning, Hannibal calls Jack, as he promised Will he would do. It's a Saturday morning and Hannibal will be having Margot and Alana over for dinner tonight, and so a lot of his time will be dedicated to preparing the food, but if Alana comes to the meeting with Jack, Hannibal imagines that the need for his presence will be minimal.

"Good morning, Jack," Hannibal greets cordially when Jack answers the phone.

"Doctor Lecter," Jack replies, sounding gruff as he always does. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to bother you on the weekend, but my flight home with Will was very eventful, and he would like to speak to you."

Jack makes another aggravated, harsh noise. Hannibal can imagine that Will is the last person he wants to see right now. "It doesn't have to be right now," Hannibal adds when Jack remains silent. "But I will be having Alana over tonight, with a mutual friend of ours for dinner, and I'm sure I could persuade her to come early, so she can act as translator."

"Alright," Jack replies. If he feels any offense that Hannibal did not extend him the dinner invitation, he hides it well. "I can come by. How's three for you?"

"That works perfectly. Thank you," Hannibal says. He ends the call and sets his phone down. Will is sitting in his kitchen at a bar stool, his face and hands clean once again. Hannibal imagines his water bill will drastically increase now that Will is living with him. He smiles. "Jack will be by at three, so you can tell him whatever it is you want to tell him."

Will hums. He's cradling a glass of water with both hands, sliding the glass along the countertop as it glides through the gathering of condensation at the bottom. Hannibal goes to the fridge and pulls out the meat he will be preparing for the meal tonight. There is the man's brains, of course, which will be the main dish, but he will also prepare appetizers in the form of fried slices of his kidneys. He can make prosciutto flowers from some of his old stock. The rest he keeps in storage for Will, should he get hungry throughout the day.

Will touches his fingers to his mouth, then out to Hannibal in a 'Thank you', and Hannibal smiles at him. "Now, the first thing I will teach you is how to make prosciutto. We won't be using this meat for tonight, since the entire process takes a few months, but I can show you how to start the process."

Will's eyes light up, and he stands and circles the counter, where Hannibal has one of the man's legs sitting on the counter. The cut is solely surrounding the femur – he sawed the man's leg above the knee so as not to make it too obviously that of a human.

Hannibal smiles, and takes a large pan, peppercorns, salt, garlic cloves, and vinegar. "Peel these," he says, and hands the garlic heads to Will, "And put them with the peppercorns in the food processor, there." He points behind Will, to the machine. Will hums, and obeys. While he does that, Hannibal dries the man's leg of any excess moisture, and then he pours enough salt in the bottom of the pan that there is almost half an inch of salt creating a layer at the bottom.

Will finishes with the processor and takes off the lid, lifting it from its motor and carrying it back to the counter. "Good," Hannibal murmurs, and Will lets out a soft purr, rubbing his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder. "Now, we want to cover the meat with a generous layer of the paste. Be thorough," he says.

Will nods, and scoops a handful of the paste onto his fingers, and starts to rub it into the meat. His hands are large and pale against the redness of the dead man's flesh. While he works, Hannibal's phone rings, and he rinses his hands before answering.

It's Alana. He smiles. "Good morning, Alana," he says, and Will pauses, lifting his eyes at the mention of her name. "Keep going, Will," Hannibal tells him, and Will bites his lower lip and nods, turning his attention back to his task. "How are you?" Hannibal asks, his attention back on the phone call.

"Jack just called me," Alana says. "He says Will asked for him."

Hannibal hums. "Yes. Will wanted to speak to him. He asked me to call Jack and I obliged."

Alana makes a worried noise over the phone. "You don't think Jack will ask about what happened on the plane, do you?" she murmurs.

"I think that's exactly what Will wants to talk about," Hannibal says. "He told me he wants to meet the owner of the mutant he killed. He wants to apologize."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, Hannibal."

"If he wants to atone for his mistakes, I see no reason why I should refuse," Hannibal replies mildly. He leans against the kitchen counter, his eyes on Will's hands, flecked with black and grey, as he rubs more of the paste into the man's leg – he took Hannibal's instructions to heart, and there is a thick layer over most of the meat now. "Will told me the girl he killed possessed very interesting abilities. I think there is a reason we should meet this man, beyond politeness."

Alana pauses. "Are you going to tell me?"

Hannibal smiles. "And ruin the fun of you finding out for yourself?" he teases.

She gives a low, warning hum. "Hannibal."

Hannibal sighs. "If you come over earlier, Will and I will tell you everything," he promises. After all, if they keep their hunt a secret, there is no reason she can't know. If Will saw troubling things in the mind of the girl, he could want to alert Jack to possible darkness in the owner. If the man is as evil as Will claimed the girl showed him, he ought not to be out and about in the world. It's a dangerous enough place already.

Alana hums. "Maybe I will," she says, as though challenging Hannibal's offer. Hannibal has no intention of refusing her – he likes Alana, and enjoys her company, and Will trusts and likes her as well. "It's been a while, anyway. My sous-chef skills are rusty."

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "I'm teaching Will to cook as well," he says, and she answers with a pleased-sounding hum of surprise. "Perhaps you will assist me."

"I'd love to," she replies. "I'll see you around two?"

"Excellent," Hannibal says, and hangs up the call. Will lets out a curious trill, his eyes raised and his head tilted so he can see Hannibal over his shoulder, out of the corner of his eye. "Alana will be visiting at two," he tells Will, and sets his phone down, coming forward so he can monitor Will's progress.

Will smiles. He lifts one hand and points to himself, then spreads his fingers out flat, almost touching his chest, and pulls it out from him with his middle finger touching the tip of his thumb like he's tugging on a string. Then, he spells out her name: A-L-A-N-A.

Hannibal smiles. "I like her, too," he replies. "She's very fond of you."

Will's smile widens, his cheeks turning pink. He finishes with the paste as the processor is emptied, and stands back for Hannibal to inspect his work. Hannibal lets out a pleased sound. "Good," he says. "Now, we place it in here." He lifts the leg and lays it on the salt. He pours more over it so that it is completely covered. "Do you know why?"

Will's brow furrows, he bites his lower lip. He lifts both fists, thumbs extended upwards, and runs them down in a wiggly line like tracing the edges of a curving ladder. Then, he spells the word: D-E-C-A-Y, and lets out a questioning noise.

Hannibal nods. "Exactly. If any bacteria can get in the meat, then it will be ruined. Or, at least, the flavor will be. Almost anything can be cooked away, but the point of prosciutto is that it remains untouched." Will nods, expression smoothing out in understanding. "Salt will also draw out any remaining moisture, ensuring that it cures properly." He nods again. Hannibal places a lid over the pan as Will washes his hands. "Put this in the cellar. It's cool enough down there that we can leave it and save room in the fridge."

Will nods. He takes the pan and goes down into the basement to place it there, and Hannibal places the processor in the sink to clean later. He wipes down the countertop and throws away the garlic skins as Will returns.

Hannibal smiles at him, and takes him by the hair to draw him close. Will's forehead tucks against his neck and Will sighs, humming softly against his collarbone. "We can wait to prepare everything else," Hannibal murmurs.

Will's mind-voice slithers against him, content and soft; "How long do we wait for the prosciutto?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles. "It will be refrigerated for about a month," he replies, "and then we must shake off the salt and let it sit for another five days, before we package and dry it. That process takes months. Years, if you're patient."

Will lets out a shocked noise. "I had no idea food took that long," he replies.

Hannibal huffs a laugh and pulls Will back. "Well, you've been given a very minimal experience of good food," he replies. "An experience I will do my best to expand and cultivate." Will smiles. "We have some time before our guests are due to arrive. Perhaps you would like to indulge me."

Will cocks his head to one side, and Hannibal presses his lips together. The whistle is in his pocket and he takes it out, holding it up for Will to see. Will's eyes flash and he takes a step back, swallowing harshly.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs. "You know that I will never harm you. You know that I care for you deeply." Will swallows again, his mouth twitching and his fingers curling at his sides. "Look at me." Will raises his eyes and meets Hannibal's. His pupils are dark and wide, the stag ready to shred his human skin and defend him if need be. "It's naïve to think that this is the only whistle made for your torture and training. If we are to bring our plans for Mason Verger to fruition, you must not be afraid of him. Or of this."

Will presses his lips together, and he nods. He lets out a soft, plaintive whine, and Hannibal sighs and lowers the whistle. "Come with me," he says, and holds his hand out to Will. Will takes it, and Hannibal leads him into his study. "We do not have the mask and collar anymore, so you must be able to control the stag."

Will's mind-voice touches him; "We should be outside."

Hannibal shakes his head. "No," he replies. He comes to a stop in the study and turns to face Will again. "If you lack incentive for control, you will lose it more quickly. Being in my home, and respecting it, and respecting me, will force you to keep a hold of yourself."

Will whines again. "I don't want to do this," he says, his fingers tightening in Hannibal's, his eyes wide. "Please, don't make me."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and looks down at the whistle again. "Will this cause you physical harm?" he asks. Will shakes his head, touches his ear, and shakes his head again.

"This is just an example of conditioning, Will. You overcame your violent nature within hours of meeting me. I have faith that you can overcome this, as well." He looks at Will again.

Will's eyes drop to the whistle, and he lets go of Hannibal's hand. Hannibal moves away and sits on the couch. "Come here," he murmurs, and holds his hand out to Will. Will takes it again, and Hannibal spreads his knees so Will can kneel on the floor, facing away from him. Hannibal slides forward and lets go of Will's hand so he can wrap his fingers around the front of Will's neck.

Will gasps, tilting his head up to allow Hannibal room. Hannibal leans down, kisses his hair, able to feel how Will's pulse is racing against his palm.

"Relax," he murmurs, and Will trembles. His breathing is unsteady, already in the first stages of panic. "I'm right here. I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you. You're safe with me."

Will's shoulders roll, tucked in like he's trying to get away. His hands flatten on his thighs, knuckles white from the pressure of his nails digging into his own flesh. He lets out a soft, desperate-sounding whine. A plea for mercy, for Hannibal's better nature.

But this is something Hannibal cannot go back on. Will must learn control, and he must learn to overcome his fear of everything Mason Verger did to him. If anything close to Will's dream comes true, Hannibal cannot allow himself or Will to be harmed through his own hesitation.

"Will," Hannibal says again, and Will shivers, tilting his head to one side to rest on Hannibal's thigh. "Calm down. I want to help you."

Will is trembling, his breathing unsteady, but he presses his lips together and closes his eyes. He nods.

Hannibal lifts the whistle to his mouth. It's a thin, reed-like thing, cool between his lips. He blows into it. He doesn't hear any noise, but Will stiffens and lets out a choked-off, terrified sound. Hannibal tightens his hand on Will's neck and he can feel how his throat gets thick, the stag rearing up and ready to tear him apart so that he can fight or flee.

He takes the whistle away and puts his hand on Will's forehead, finding it damp with sweat. Will's scent is thick with fear and Hannibal hums, leaning down more so that his mouth is by Will's ear. "Shh," he says, curling his fingers in Will's sweat-damp hair. "You're here. You're with me. You're safe."

Will moans, and his voice sounds like there are two of him – that of the man, and of the stag, barely held back. Will opens his eyes and they're entirely black, his lips part and Hannibal sees the shine of black ooze on his tongue. He tightens his hand on Will's throat.

"Stay with me, darling," Hannibal whispers. Will swallows harshly, gasping again, and shudders when Hannibal tugs on his hair, his eyelids fluttering closed once more. "That's it, good boy. Stay with me."

Will whimpers, lifting up onto the balls of his feet, his knees close to his chest. He nuzzles Hannibal's thigh and Hannibal kisses his temple, pleased at how hard Will is obviously fighting to keep calm and keep himself in control.

Will's mind-voice is calling for him, Hannibal can hear his name like a far-off cry. "I'm here, Will," he says, and tries to push the words back mentally as well, as best he can when he has no reference for how. But Will must hear him, because his shoulders abruptly go lax. He's still sweaty and his heart is pounding, but he's not shaking as badly anymore.

When he opens his eyes again, they're the normal mesh of green and blue, and Hannibal smiles. "Well done," he says. He sets the whistle down and turns Will, lifting him up onto his knees so that Hannibal can rest their foreheads together. "Very well done, Will. I'm so proud of you."

Will gasps, his hands flattening on Hannibal's thighs. His eyes are wide, the flickers of fear still making them dark, but he's ultimately trusting and sweet in Hannibal's hold. He swallows and lets out a quiet, plaintive noise, and Hannibal hums, cupping both cheeks and kissing his forehead.

Will's fingers curl around his wrists, shaking but strong. "That was terrifying," he whispers into Hannibal's mind.

Hannibal smiles. "We give greater power to our fears if we do not confront them," he replies. Will bites his lower lip. "But I will be gentle with you, for now. I will not relent with this, Will – you must learn to overcome your fears. Just as you must learn to communicate with me without touch."

Will winces, his mouth going tight at the corners. "It feels good when you touch me," he says. "I don't want to be apart from you."

"Nor I, from you, my dear," Hannibal replies gently. "But it's not practical. You cannot hold onto my hand like a child as we navigate through the world, if you truly want to be my equal."

Will's eyes flash, and his mouth twitches in something like a smirk. "You preach distance and independence with your words, but your actions tell a different story," he says. "You delight in my dependence on you. Even now, you're fostering my sense of safety and my trust, so that I feel like you are the only person in the world who can see me, and protect me."

"Are you in need of protection?" Hannibal asks mildly.

Will shakes his head. "No," he says. "But that just makes it all the more a triumph for you."

Hannibal smiles, petting Will's hair back from his face. "I take no pleasure in being cruel to you, Will," he says. "Or treating you unkindly. What I do, I do for your sake."

Will sighs. "I believe you." He licks his lips and meets Hannibal's gaze again. Hannibal pulls back, and takes the whistle, putting it back in his pocket. When he does it, he sees the last of the tension melt from Will's shoulders.

"Come here," Hannibal says, and gestures for Will to join him on the couch. Will does, purring when Hannibal pets through his hair and turns him, so that Will's body rests over his, Will's head on his chest and Hannibal's head propped on a pillow against the armrest of the couch, their legs entangled. Will's purr gets louder and he rests his fingers on the exposed skin of Hannibal's other wrist so that they can talk.

"Alana seems worried about you wanting to speak to Jack," Hannibal murmurs.

Will sighs. "She is afraid I'll tell Jack what I did," he replies. Hannibal hums in answer. "Even now, I'm not sure what I'm going to say." He lifts his head to meet Hannibal's eyes. "I think there's a reason that man was bringing his mutant here, right before a weekend."

"Oh?"

"My old master's auctions are on the weekends," Will adds. Hannibal really hopes that one day he stops referring to Mason and Margot like that. "And there's a tracking chip, still inside me. He would know I was in Ohio, and I don't think it would be impossible for him to find out what flight we were on, and arrange that the mutant girl was there as well."

"It is a remarkable coincidence," Hannibal concedes.

"I don't know if he meant for me to kill her," Will replies. "But he must have known there was a possibility, that I would see her, and know what she could do. What her *master* was doing. Maybe the Vergers arranged for this trade. Which means the man we killed is an evil man, or the man selling her is evil. I need to know."

"And what do you hope to accomplish, with this knowledge?" Hannibal asks.

Will huffs a short, frustrated breath, frowning. "I'm not sure," he says.

"Do you know where the tracking chip is?" Hannibal asks. Will shakes his head.

"They put me under when they did it. When I woke up, I was healed."

"Perhaps an MRI will find it for us," Hannibal says. "I have a friend who still works in the hospital. He's an oncologist. He would have access to such a machine."

Will shivers. "Will it hurt?"

"An MRI? No," Hannibal says, smiling and petting through Will's hair again until the tension leaves him once more. "I would never do anything to harm you, or let others harm you."

Will lets out a quiet purr, nuzzling Hannibal's hand. "There's something else I want to talk to you about," he murmurs in Hannibal's mind. He feels nervous, itchy, and Hannibal gives a curious hum. "I don't think this is the case, but if it turns out I do have a family – a mate, or children, or parents – will you let me find them?"

Hannibal pauses, considering the question. It honestly wasn't something he had given a lot of thought. "Yes," he finally says. "If that's what you wanted."

"It might be cruel," Will says, "to come back into their lives. After all, I've been missing for over three years by this point. Do you…think they would want to see me?"

Hannibal hums. "I cannot predict that," he replies. His fingers go tight in Will's hair and he thinks of Alana's words; *Will knows at whose side he belongs*. But what if that ceases to be the case? If Will does have a family, somewhere, Hannibal doesn't think they would be unhappy to see him.

Then again, if Will's abilities and change turned out to be so drastic, they might think he's a monster. Mutants are usually born, but all signs point to Will being *made*, which raises questions all on its own. Was Will a vagrant, who nobody would miss? Did his family sell him to the Vergers? Did he volunteer willingly?

Only questions Margot could possibly answer, and that's assuming she knows anything about Will's past.

Will lifts his head, and pushes himself upright. He crawls closer up Hannibal's chest and kneels over his legs, his weight on Hannibal's thighs as he gently touches Hannibal's cheek. "Even if they do exist," he says, his mouth not moving but his voice strong in Hannibal's head, "I don't know them. I don't know if I want to know them. I am yours. Everything that I am, everything I will become, is a product of your designs. I don't want to leave you."

Hannibal swallows harshly. It takes him a moment to realize the emotion he's feeling is akin to worry, a heady mix of possessive and jealous love, a fear that Will might want to return to his family, and live as any normal man, away from Hannibal's darkness and his cruelty and his machinations.

Will presses his lips together, and leans down and kisses Hannibal. The ooze on his tongue is mostly gone but Hannibal can taste it – it's surprisingly sweet, like raspberry coulis on cheesecake. Hannibal cups the back of Will's neck and kisses him back, pulling him closer as Will deepens the kiss and lets out a quiet moan.

"I love you," Will whispers, as gentle as an ocean breeze, reverent as a sinner in church. "I said it before; I never want there to be a life I lead away from your side. This feeling is new, and powerful, and I swear it will never burn out."

Hannibal growls, rising up and rolling Will on the couch until his back is against the cushions and Hannibal can cover him. He kisses Will fiercely, one hand in his hair fisting tight, the other resting on his abused and broken throat. Will cannot speak, but his body sings for Hannibal, a delightful symphony in his head amidst the silence of the room.

Will answers him kiss for kiss, touch for touch, until the possessive fire in Hannibal's heart starts to cool, sated by Will's sweet whines and his needy hands. When he pulls back for air, Will's eyes are dark and wide, his lips pink from Hannibal's mouth. Will bites his lower lip, his fingers shaking, when he touches Hannibal's cheek again.

"Don't send me away," he whispers.

"I won't," Hannibal replies. "Don't leave."

Will smiles, a purr rumbling in his chest, and he kisses Hannibal again. "Never."

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

FINALLY, the dinner scene :D

Hannibal could happily spend the rest of the day kissing and touching Will, following wherever this easy physicality leads, but they have people coming over and food to prepare. He forces himself to pull away from Will, pleased when Will seems just as reluctant to part from him. Will cradles his wrist and nuzzles Hannibal's shoulder, his steps just a half-measure behind as Hannibal leads the way back into the kitchen.

Will's mind-voice brushes against Hannibal's; "I'd like to go outside," he murmurs. Hannibal turns to regard him, and Will offers a small smile. His lips are still very pink from Hannibal's kisses, a lovely flush still lingers on his cheeks. "I want to try and practice calling out for you."

Hannibal smiles, and nods. "Alright," he says. He cups Will's neck with his free hand and kisses his forehead. "I will call you when Alana gets here."

Will nods and lets go of Hannibal's wrist. His mental presence fades from the edges of Hannibal's mind and he turns and walks out of the kitchen, through the patio doors and out into the backyard. The air is very cold, and he leaves the door cracked. The second pelt laid across Hannibal's patio furniture is still there, and he takes it and settles down in one of the chairs, wrapping it around his shoulders. He looks oddly regal like that, like some old Viking lord in his dinner hall waiting to be served.

Hannibal brings his glass of water to him and leaves him be. He returns to the kitchen and catches the shine of moisture the stag left behind, marring the glass. There are still stains of blood on the floor as well. Hannibal busies himself with cleaning the kitchen, the hallway, and pouring stain remover and bleach on the carpet in Will's room to try and alleviate the stain as best he can. The scent of bleach stings his nose, and he huffs and opens the window in Will's room to try and combat the scent.

While he works, he tries to think of all the things he wants to learn from Margot, and from Will's meeting with Jack. He needs to know if the mutant girl Will killed *was* intended for the Verger auctions. He needs to know if the Vergers are trying to delve not only into the mutant trade, but the serial killer one as well. Hannibal has no doubt that Mason Verger would try and find friends amongst the sadistic elite.

He thinks of the man they killed, the man whose leg is turning into prosciutto, and whose brains he will be serving at the dinner. While he does it, he starts to grate the parmesan. If Mason Verger is creating and breeding fighting animals, perhaps he intends to start a ring of

people who are to be his friends, whose appetites are far less savory that he can exploit through the acquisition and sale of mutants. That man they killed couldn't possibly have afforded one on his own, if his car and clothes were any indication.

Mason Verger must have found out about him, somehow. And he might still be actively tracking Will. Hannibal will need to find out, if he can, where the chip is in Will's body, and all that he can learn about Will's past. Will has no voice to hint at an accent, no origin in the way he speaks since his method of communicating comes entirely from Margot, Ichi, and the sisters. And the voice Will has in Hannibal's mind, Hannibal knows, is simply a product of his own projections.

Unless…

Hannibal pauses.

Unless it isn't. Will had insisted that the way he appears in Hannibal's study is the way Hannibal sees him, but there's no reason for that to be the case. Hannibal knew he was violent, knew he was mute, and therefore Will's voice and his human teeth and his clawless hands have no reason to appear as they are, except that there might be some part of Will that remembers himself as he had been.

It's not the first time Hannibal has suspected the existence of repressed memories. The mind is an unstable thing, for all its fine-tuned bells and whistles. One break in the calibration can send the whole thing spiraling out of control. The consciousness is a product of nature and nurture. Robbed of nature, Will has only been allowed to form himself as something nurtured by Mason, Margot, and the other mutants.

But as soon as he came into Hannibal's care, he changed. Or he allowed himself to appear as he always had been; gentle, capable of shame and distress. Margot has never seemed afraid of him, and if her plot with Will runs deeper and farther back than Hannibal's care, which is definitely the case, then perhaps Margot knew him in a previous life as well. Maybe she is the reason Will came into Mason's care in the first place.

Spiderwebs upon spiderwebs, forts and lies upon forts and lies. Hannibal has never encountered a puzzle so invigorating.

What was Will's last name? Everyone has one, surely. If he could find even that out, it would unlock the next pieces of the puzzle and allow Hannibal to see.

He looks up at the sound of a doorbell, surprised to find that it is already almost two. It must be Alana. He smiles and washes his hands and goes to the door, his smile widening when he sees her. She greets him with a fond expression, stepping inside when he invites her in and taking off her coat.

"Will is out in the back garden," Hannibal tells her, leading the way to the kitchen. She's carrying a bottle of wine as a gift, which Hannibal finds amusing since he provides her own drink and is more than capable of supplying his own wine as well. Some things are instinctive for humans, down to the redundant.

"How is he?" she asks, and sets the bottle down. Hannibal takes a bottle of her brew from the fridge and pours her a tall glass of it. She takes a drink of it, humming in appreciation.

"I think it's safe to say he's doing excellently," Hannibal replies, no small amount of pride coming through. "He has made himself very much at home here."

"That's good," she says warmly. Her eyes track to the patio, where Will is still sitting, his eyes closed and head tilted back to feel the sun on his face. She raises her eyebrows when she sees the pelt on his shoulders and gives a low hum. "Why's he outside?"

Hannibal pauses, before he presses his lips together. "You have seen Will's ability to get inside people's minds," he says, and she nods. "This gift requires physical contact, skin-to-skin. I'm encouraging him to try and hone this ability without such contact."

She raises an eyebrow. "What, so telepathy?" she asks.

Hannibal nods. "If he can reach out to someone, me or you or anyone else, without having to touch them, I believe it will have a lot of benefit," he says. "If he's in distress, he can reach out to me for comfort or guidance. And though I still fully intend to learn sign language, it means he can communicate with me without having to touch me or spell everything out."

She huffs, low and amused, and raises an eyebrow as she takes another sip of her drink. "That sounds…very intimate," she says lightly. "And secretive. Are you worried there might be conversations you need to have only with him?"

Hannibal smiles. "Yes," he replies plainly.

She smiles again. "That didn't take long."

"I gave our conversation on the plane a lot of thought, and I realized you were right," Hannibal says. He turns away and takes out a cutting board and a knife and lays them out for her, as well as carrots, parsnips, and sweet potatoes. She circles the counter to start slicing – despite her 'rusty' sous-chef skills, she has helped him with enough dinner parties to know his routine and falls back into it with ease.

"I'm usually right," she says with a teasing smile, "but could you be more specific?"

"Simply that what you said is true; Will's demeanor is designed to cultivate a desire for care and affection. As a result, I find that I care about him, and feel a great affection for him. And he has revealed a deep fondness for me. Denying ourselves the potential for a happy relationship just because he's a mutant is regressive."

She hums. "Well, though I feel as though I am the one responsible for this revelation, I must also advise caution," she says, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "If things were to end badly, it's not like you could simply break up and have it be clean. You legally own him."

"I've thought about that," Hannibal says, though in truth the idea that Will might leave him has only recently occurred to him, and then immediately been assuaged by Will's confessions.

"I think if there ever were a time where he and I needed distance from each other, there would be much more drastic reasons than a simple break up."

She nods, pressing her lips together. "My point exactly."

Hannibal pauses, and then sighs. "Well, since we're on the subject," he says, and she stops slicing the potatoes to look at him. "If there were ever a time or reason I could not care for Will, would you?"

She blinks at him, then frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if something were to happen to me, would you take care of him?" Hannibal asks.

She looks at him for a long, long moment, before she nods. "Of course," she says. "You are both my friends, and I care for you both very deeply. I would do everything in my power to make sure either of you were safe."

"You are the best friend I could ask for, Alana," Hannibal replies, smiling. She answers his smile with one of her own. "Let me go fetch Will. I told him I would let him know when you arrived."

She nods, and Hannibal goes to the door. It opens smoothly and Will doesn't react, but Hannibal knows he's aware. He closes the door and approaches Will.

"Will," he calls, and Will tilts his head to one side, letting out a soft hum. "Alana is here."

Will opens his eyes, straightening up with an eager sound. He shrugs off the pelt and stands, going to Hannibal's side. Hannibal cups his neck and lets Will nuzzle his shoulder as he is so ready to always do, and leads the way back into the kitchen. He closes and locks the patio door behind him.

Will purrs, signing Alana's name, and goes to her side as she smiles and nods to him. She sets the knife down so that she can take his hands and he lets out another soft purr, lifting her knuckles to his forehead, and then lets her hands go. "So good to see you, Will," she says warmly. "You're looking well."

Will smiles. His hands move in fluid, quick gestures, and she lets out a quiet laugh, her cheeks turning pink. "Hannibal," she says, scolding but teasing, her smile wide.

"What did he say?" Hannibal asks.

"He said that the room gets bright whenever I'm in it," she replies, her cheeks darkening further. Will grins at her, purring loudly, and she shakes her head and turns her attention back to the vegetables as Will takes a seat. "You're not allowed to teach him to flirt."

"I think genuine compliments don't count," Hannibal replies, smiling when Will grins at him, showing his teeth. "But you must be gentle with her, Will," he adds, his tone soft and teasing as he pets through Will's hair.

"I think he has the potential to be an absolute scoundrel," Alana says.

Will huffs a laugh, and winks at her when she meets his eyes.

Hannibal smiles, the warm feeling in his chest growing hot and heavy when he sees how comfortable Will has become in his home. He had never given the thought to companionship beyond sating his body's needs for sexual release, or brief indulgent moments of flirtatious conversation, but Will conjures strong feelings and desires for both. He thinks it would absolutely delight him further to take Will hunting as a man, to see him lure their prey close with pretty smiles and low laughs and gentle touches, only to have Hannibal come up behind their pig and slaughter them, bathing Will in their blood.

The world is beautiful, and Will's presence brightens it beyond measure.

Hannibal smiles, and touches Will's shoulder to draw his attention. "While Alana assists with the vegetables, you should come help me with the meat," he says. Will's eyes flash and he nods, standing and following Hannibal towards the fridge, where Hannibal has set aside the brains and cuts from the man's ribs and arms.

He takes everything out and Alana's eyebrows rise when she sees the choice. "Are those… brains?" she asks.

Hannibal nods. "Will chose the recipe," he says, taking out a large bowl. He hands it to Will. "Fill this with water, please."

Will nods, taking the bowl to the sink. "He informed me that Margot isn't often allowed cheese, at the behest of her brother."

"Margot," Alana repeats, nodding. "What can you tell me about her?"

"I could tell you a great deal of things," Hannibal says with a teasing smile, and it widens when Alana rolls her eyes.

"All I know about her is what I know of the Vergers," Alana says. "Which is very little. And that you and Will consider her a friend."

"Yes," Hannibal says. Will brings the bowl back and sets it down. "I have known the family for many years, and it was through them and Jack that Will came into our lives. Margot treated Will kindly, and for that I feel I will always owe her a debt of gratitude."

Will makes a quiet noise, and points to himself, before holding up two fingers. 'Me too'. Though Hannibal suspects that is not the correct sign for it.

"Well, tell me about her," Alana says.

Hannibal smiles. "Will, put the brains in this bowl and put them back in the fridge, please," he says, and Will nods, obeying with another quiet purr. "Margot is a kind soul. She has a wonderful sense of humor." He pauses. "She's pretty."

Alana looks at him, her eyes sharp. "Should that matter?" she asks coolly.

Hannibal's smile widens. "I just think you'll like her, is all," he replies evenly.

Will comes back into view and he gestures between himself and Hannibal, then points to his temple. He flattens his palm and taps his temple again, then drops his hand to his right shoulder and curls it, as though gesturing for something to move behind him.

"You think she'll know about your past," Alana repeats quietly, before she raises her eyebrows and looks between Will and Hannibal. "Does she know that's why you invited her here?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "But she's a smart girl. I'm sure she suspects. There isn't a lot of mutual connection between us, aside from her brother, and Will."

"I've heard about Mason Verger," Alana says darkly, putting her eyes back on the sweet potatoes as she goes back to slicing them into sticks. "Or, rather, I've heard stories about the things he's done. Guy's got a longer rap sheet than Eminem and he still gets away with murder."

Hannibal hums. Murder is entirely possible for Mason Verger. "Nevertheless, it seems Margot did not inherit whatever genetic failure Mason did," he says.

Will freezes, making a soft noise, and puts a hand on Hannibal's wrist. "Jack is here," he says into Hannibal's mind, and Hannibal raises an eyebrow.

Then, the doorbell rings.

Alana looks up. "That'll be Jack," she says, something like aggravation on her face.

"Will just told me," Hannibal says. He looks to Will. "How do you always know when someone is coming?"

Will smiles. He takes his hand from Hannibal's wrist and closes his fist, thumb curled along the outside of his forefinger, and touches it to his mouth. He hums.

Alana huffs. "It's a secret," she says.

Hannibal shakes his head, but goes to get the door. It is indeed Jack, a hat on his head pulled low and a scarf wrapped up around his mouth, shivering within his thick coat. Hannibal ushers him inside. "Thank you again for coming, Jack," Hannibal says. "I appreciate you taking the time, especially given the circumstances of your last interaction with Will."

"Well, as long as he keeps in line, I got no problem with him," Jack replies shortly. Then, he pauses in the hallway, and sighs. "Look," he says, wiping a hand over his face. Hannibal tilts his head to one side and regards him coolly. "He did get an I.D. for Buddish. In any other case that would have been useful. And the Director isn't ready to call it quits yet."

Hannibal hums, swallowing back his aggravation. Will wants to be useful, after all. "I understand he was a large investment for the FBI," he says.

"You got that right," Jack says darkly. "If another murderer shows up, I might need him in my corner again." He looks at Hannibal. "I assume I can rely on your full cooperation?"

"Was that ever in question?" Hannibal asks.

Jack's eyes narrow. He unravels his scarf from around his neck and sighs, folding it and shoving it into the pocket of his coat. He doesn't undress like he intends to stay for long. "Let's just let him say what he needs to say," he says.

Hannibal nods, and leads the way back into the kitchen. "May I offer you something to drink?" he asks.

"Coffee is good, if you have it," Jack replies, and Hannibal nods and starts to prepare the French press. "Alana," Jack greets, and she gives him a nod in response. Jack doesn't address Will, except to turn to him and straighten up, trying to appear like the most in-control man in the room.

"You may use the dining room to talk, if you wish," Hannibal adds.

"This is fine," Jack replies. "I don't want to interrupt."

Hannibal looks at Will, and finds Will regarding Jack. He doesn't appear nervous, but assessing, like he's measuring the lunging distance between where he's standing and Jack's throat. Hannibal turns away again to hide his smile.

There is a pause, and then Alana starts to speak, translating for Will as he signs; "There was a mutant girl on the plane Doctor Lecter and I took from Ohio," she says. "I have reason to believe that the owner of that girl is a murderer."

Jack hums, and it sounds skeptical. "What reason would that be?"

"She showed me what she could do. She had the ability to recreate things she had seen, and she showed me things her master had made her watch. They were very bad things. He hurt people and made her watch so that she could replay the scenes over and over again for him."

Hannibal turns in time to see Jack's eyebrows rise. "Could you identify this mutant girl, if you saw her?" he asks.

Will hesitates, biting his lower lip. "I killed her," he signs, and Alana says.

Jack blinks at him, before his expression goes from one of polite interest to a deep, disappointed frown. Will ducks his head, whining quietly, and Hannibal resists the urge to go to him and pet through his hair, soothe him from his distress. Jack's anger is like that of a father, wrathful and cutting.

"You killed her," Jack repeats.

Will licks his lips, and nods. "I was afraid," he signs, and Alana says.

Jack scoffs. "What does something like you have to be afraid of?" he demands.

Will flinches again, and Alana looks at Jack. "There's no need for that," she says sharply.

Will reaches out to her and puts a hand on her arm, shaking his head. It occurs to Hannibal that just because Jack doesn't know all of Will's secrets, it doesn't mean he lacks the ability to see past them. After all, Jack is the head of the BSU, and he's not an unobservant man. That thought is immediately followed by the realization that Hannibal had never asked Will what exactly it was he intended to say. Where will the truth end and the lies begin?

Will's hands move and Alana sighs, speaking for him. "I was afraid because she saw Doctor Lecter, and you, and Alana," she says. "If her master knew I had met her, and knew that there was a possibility that the FBI would come looking for him, he might try to hurt us."

Which is…not untrue. Hannibal smiles, delighted at Will's ingenuity.

Jack's eyes narrow. "So you decided to sit on this information instead?" he asks.

Will lets out a quiet, plaintive noise. Hannibal busies his hands with pouring Jack a cup of coffee, and circles the island to hand it to him. Jack takes it but doesn't look like he has any intention of drinking it – his eyes are on Will. His full attention is on Will, his downcast eyes and his fidgeting hands.

"I'm sorry," Will signs, circling his fist in front of his chest. Alana says the rest for him; "She didn't get a chance to tell her master what I showed her, but I didn't know what else to do."

"It's alright, Will," Alana says, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You're helping now."

At her tone, Jack seems to finally relent, which is good. He is behaving very rudely, and Hannibal finds his patience wearing thin. "Did you see this man's face?" he asks, and Will nods. "Would you be able to show the sketch artist?" Will nods again.

Jack nods and sets the cup down. "Bring him by the office tomorrow morning, first thing," he tells Hannibal sharply. Hannibal nods. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

Will's fingers twitch. He looks to Hannibal, and Hannibal meets his gaze, before he gives a short, single shake of his head. They should leave Will's suspicions about the Vergers out of it for now. Will presses his lips together and shakes his head, and Jack doesn't look convinced, but he nods with another heavy sigh.

"Thank you, Doctor Lecter," he says. "I'll see myself out."

He leaves, and Hannibal waits until he hears the sound of the door closing before he turns to Will. Alana lets out an annoyed noise, peeling the carrots with more vehemence than necessary once he's gone. "Sometimes that man just annoys the crap out of me," she mutters.

A sentiment Hannibal is sure they all share. He smiles. "Well done, Will," he says, and finally succumbs to the desire to put his hand in Will's hair, petting him gently. Will deflates against him, purring softly as he nuzzles Hannibal's shoulder. "You performed remarkably."

Will touches his fingertips to his mouth, then out in a 'Thank you'. Then, he touches Hannibal's cheek. "May I go outside again?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies. Will smiles, and then turns and gently rests his forehead on Alana's shoulder, before he takes his leave of them, unlocking and opening the door and stepping outside once more.

Alana watches him go. "You never told me about that part," she says, looking to Hannibal. "About the owner."

"Will only revealed that part to me last night," Hannibal replies mildly, the lie coming smoothly off his tongue. She hums. "Perhaps he was afraid we might react similarly."

"I don't judge him for waiting," Alana says. "I know he has a protective streak almost as large as my own. He'd never let anyone hurt us."

Hannibal nods. "There is something else I want to share with you," he says. She looks at him and Hannibal takes the whistle out of his pocket, setting it on the counter. "This was given to me with his mask and collar when I purchased him from the Vergers. I was told that he has been trained to associate the sound of it with great pain and torture. I believed they used it to keep him in line."

She lets out a rough, angry noise. "That's awful," she says. "You should destroy it."

Hannibal smiles. "And, eventually, I will," he replies. "But I wanted to use it, first."

Her eyes snap to his, wide and disbelieving. "You want to hurt him?" she demands.

"Of course not," Hannibal replies. "But it is a conditioning that I want to train him out of. I used it on him today – just a short session this time – and I hope to get him to the point where he reacts to it no more violently than he would react to a bird call or a doorbell. Just as I want him to get to the point where he no longer loses complete control of himself whenever he is afraid, or angry."

Alana holds his gaze, looking into Hannibal's eyes like she's expecting him to lie to her. "I… suppose I can understand that," she says. "But it feels like I'm condoning you torturing him."

"Do you think I want to hurt him?" Hannibal asks.

She shakes her head. "No," she says, quickly. "Of course not." She sighs and looks away. "I wish you hadn't told me about that."

"I am telling you about it so that, if the wrong person finds it, you will know of its existence," Hannibal replies. "I don't believe this whistle is the only one that was made." He takes it and puts it back in his pocket. "Again, I'm simply thinking ahead; if something happens to me, you need to know all of Will's potential triggers and stressors. Even now he is still very afraid of Mason Verger."

"You keep talking like you expect something to happen to you," Alana says quietly. "Are you in danger? Is Will?"

Hannibal smiles, and shakes his head. "No," he replies. "I suppose I'm trying to force practicality into an impractical situation." He sighs. "Forgive me; it's a hard habit to break."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Hannibal," Alana murmurs. "Will would never allow it."

Hannibal calls Will back inside when it's time to poach and fry the brains. He adds a generous amount of salt, peppercorns, parsley stalks, and lemon juice to the bowl of water as it starts to boil, making sure that Will is watching the entire time while he has Alana prepare the parmesan and breadcrumbs.

"Brains are very delicate," he tells Will. "We must be careful not to overcook them. Start a timer for four minutes, please."

Will nods, taking the timer and setting it to four minutes just as the water starts to boil. He has Will and Alana set the table and reduces the heat to a simmer once the water is boiling. Once the timer goes off he calls Will back to him as Alana checks the roasting vegetables, and scoops the balls of brains out with a slotted spoon and lays them on a baking sheet.

Will lets out a curious noise and brushes his hand across Hannibal's bared forearm, so he can ask; "What do we do with the water?"

"Nothing," Hannibal replies. "It's served its purpose."

Will frowns. "Cooking is so wasteful," he says.

Hannibal smiles. "Sometimes."

He bids Will salt the brains, then dust them in flour and egg wash. Then he lays out the breadcrumbs with the parmesan on a baking tray and tells Will to coat them in the mixture. Will does so, his fingers cradling the organs with utmost gentleness.

Hannibal takes out a pan and scoops out a generous dollop of butter, and once it is foaming with heat, he starts to fry the brains. Will watches with rapt fascination, his jaws parted and nostrils flared as he takes in the scents of cooking meat.

When they are golden-brown, Hannibal piles them onto a large, round plate to serve, and covers them with Clingfilm to seal in moisture while they wait for dinner. There is still about twenty minutes before Margot is due to arrive. "Put these in the oven to keep them warm, once Alana removes the vegetables," he tells Will, and Will nods, smiling.

He presses his lips together and nuzzles Hannibal's shoulder, his fingers still warm on Hannibal's arm. "I like this," he says quietly, soft with adoration.

Hannibal smiles, and tries to push the thoughts back into Will's head instead of speaking them aloud; "So do I."

Will goes tense, lifting his head, his eyes wide. Hannibal meets his gaze and tries again; "Can you hear me?" he asks.

Will licks his lips, his eyes getting dark, and he nods. His fingers tighten on Hannibal's arm. "I can feel you, too," he says. He swallows harshly and ducks his gaze. "Like you're touching my head."

"When you speak to me like this, it feels like you're touching me," Hannibal says in his mind. "You brush against me like a cat."

"You are…less gentle than that," Will says, his lips twitching in a smile. "Don't try so hard."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, and when he tries to speak to Will again, he imagines his voice as more of a whisper than a shout; "How's this?"

Will purrs, strong and fine, his eyes going heavy lidded. His breathing is unsteady. "… Better," Will whispers in Hannibal's head, and Hannibal feels a warmth he's sure isn't coming from him shoot through his head, smothering his thoughts for a brief moment. "I want to feel you like this all the time."

Hannibal smiles. "Another incentive for you to evolve," he says.

Alana clears her throat and Will straightens, blushing at her knowing look. "Don't want to interrupt," she says. "But there's someone at the door."

Hannibal blinks. He hadn't heard a knock, and Will hadn't given any indication either. But he doesn't seem surprised – he looks elated, and his purr gets louder as he pulls his hand from Hannibal's arm. Hannibal goes to the door and Will follows, practically bouncing in place at the idea of seeing Margot again.

She looks lovely as she always does, dressed in a royal blue pantsuit that makes her eyes shine. She has a bottle of wine in her hands and smiles when Hannibal opens the door and lets out a high-pitched sound of joy when she sees Will. "So great to see you both again," she says, and steps inside, shrugging off her long black coat. "Doctor Lecter, this is for you."

"Thank you, Margot," Hannibal replies, taking the bottle. Will's hands are curled in front of his chest, like he wants to sign, or reach out and hug Margot, but holds himself back. Hannibal takes her coat and hands the bottle to Will, so he can hang it, before he gestures for her to go down the hallway. "Dinner is ready. You're just on time."

"Excellent!"

"Margot Verger, may I introduce Doctor Alana Bloom."

Alana looks up when Margot enters the room, her eyes raking Margot up and down, before she greets Margot with a warm smile. She rinses her hands and circles the kitchen island, holding her hand out to shake. "Pleased to meet you."

"You as well," Margot says. She has the same look on her as when she's had a little too much champagne.

"May I offer you some wine?" Hannibal asks.

"Yes, please!" Margot says. Will touches her shoulder and she turns, smiling at him as he meets her eyes. She cups his cheeks and smooths back a wayward curl of hair. "And you're looking so well, Will. I'm so happy to see Doctor Lecter is taking care of you."

Will smiles. There's a moment of silence, where Hannibal now realizes that he and Margot are speaking. Will's eyes have turned black and he knows that that means now and realizes that when he'd first had Will in his study, Will's eyes had been closed, so he hadn't noticed.

Alana notices. She raises an eyebrow and looks at Hannibal expectantly.

Hannibal shrugs, and pours Margot a glass of wine.

Margot and Will part and Margot's eyes are shining, she's radiant with joy from whatever Will has shared with her. Hannibal hands her a glass and looks between them all.

He nods to the dining room. "Shall we?"

"Oh my God, this is so good!" Margot exclaims, hardly finished with her first bite of food before taking a second. "I swear, Doctor Lecter, in another life I would have insisted you be my personal chef."

"An opportunity I would have happily obliged," Hannibal replies, smiling. He is seated at the right-hand seat from the head of the table, Will on his right, Alana across from him, Margot to her left. Hannibal hasn't missed how Alana keeps looking at Margot, a flush on her face that has nothing to do with alcohol or the heat of the room.

He smiles, and wonders if Will sees it too.

"Some of the credit must go to Alana and Will," he adds. "They were wonderful assistants today."

Margot smiles at Alana. "How long have you known Doctor Lecter?" she asks.

"Years," Alana replies. "He was my professor for a while when I was getting my degree, and I suppose we never stopped being friends."

"Well, I insist that you and I become friends immediately, then!"

Alana laughs, warm and pleased. "I'd be delighted."

Will lets out a low purr. He has the brains as everyone else, but Hannibal has also given him a side-dish of pineapple since Will mentioned he liked the taste so much, as well as a small helping of raw ribeye from the dead man in their basement. Margot and Alana are apparently used to the sight of raw meat enough now that it doesn't even faze them.

"So, Doctor Lecter -."

"Please, Margot," Hannibal says, "you don't need to be so formal with me."

She smiles, her eyes shining. "Hannibal, then," she amends, "what have you been up to? Mason has missed you dearly the last few weeks."

"I'm sure," Hannibal replies smoothly. "But as you can imagine, caring for Will has taken up a great deal of my time. It is no burden, but I hardly saw fit to return to the auctions when I had already made a purchase."

"And here I thought you just enjoyed my company," Margot replies, but it's teasing and soft. Alana huffs a laugh. Margot sighs and sits back, an air of aloofness coming over her. "Mason keeps making jokes that Will is going to eat you."

"Oh, he definitely tried," Hannibal says. Margot's eyes snap to him and Will growls, even though he's smiling, knowing that Hannibal is joking. "But we came to a quick agreement regarding that, and to put it plainly, I have been delighted ever since." He looks to Will, meets his eyes, and smiles.

"I'm so glad to hear that," Margot says quietly, her eyes on Will when Hannibal looks back at her.

Will lets out a quiet, soothing sound, and reaches across the table towards her. He can't quite reach, and she sits forward, taking his hand and smiling when he squeezes her fingers. Then, she blinks, and cocks her head to one side. She lets go. "Oh," she says.

"What is it?"

"Will told me you wanted to know about his past."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, and hums. "I was hoping to be a little more tactful about asking," he says mildly, and Will huffs, "but since it's in the open; yes. I find myself incredibly curious."

"As am I," Alana replies. "It's not often I meet a mutant who has no memory beyond his time in captivity."

Margot looks at her. "Have you met many mutants?" she asks.

Alana smiles. "That's what my specialty is," she says. "Mutant psychology."

"Oh, how fascinating," Margot says, genuine and bright. "I'd love to pick your brain about that, sometime."

Alana smiles. "Any time."

Margot replies with another blush, looking down at her food for a brief moment. She sighs, and raises her eyes. "I don't know much," she says apologetically. "But…I'll try and answer any questions that I can."

"That's all we can ask for," Alana says, soothing.

Hannibal smiles. "No one here is going to judge you, Margot," he says. Will nods beside him. "We just want to know the truth, whatever you can tell us." Margot bites the side of her lower lip, lifting her hand to click her nails against her teeth, one elbow on the table. "I was under the impression that mutants were born, not made. Given how old Will is, I can assume that's not the case with him?"

Margot's eyes flash to Will, and she sighs. "Will came to us as a mutant," she says. Hannibal blinks, genuinely surprised at that. "Mason told me his previous master had died. Whether or not I believe him, whether or not that's true, you can never really be sure with Mason." She shrugs one shoulder. "But apparently she died, and her daughter was meant to take over his care, but he ended up with us instead."

Will frowns, looking down at his plate. Hannibal presses his knee against Will's under the table.

Will's fingers twitch, and he makes a gesture. "She didn't want me?" Alana asks.

Margot's face is a mask of sympathy, and she shakes her head. "It could have just been my brother wanted you more," she replies. "He can be pretty persuasive. Or downright tyrannical. Tomato, tomahto."

Hannibal hums. "So he always had these abilities?" he asks.

Margot shakes her head. A flash of anger passes over her face. "No," she says. "Or…I'm sorry, I'm not really sure how it all works, with mutants and all that." She gives an apologetic smile to the three of them. "But Will was…*you* were…" She looks at Will. "You were a shapeshifter. You were so scared. And Mason made it worse. And he decided he wanted to work with you one-on-one, and the next thing I knew there was a creature in a cage in our holding cells and I barely recognized you."

Will swallows harshly, looking down. His hands move again. "Could I speak, when I came to you?"

"Yes," Margot says, her eyes brightening with unshed tears. "You could do so much when you came to us. You were gentle, and sweet, and you and I became friends. I remember, you and I would go walking together, when you were a stag. I wasn't afraid to go near the pig pens when you were with me." She swallows and puts her hand to her mouth again. "I'm sorry." She shakes her head, her breathing unsteady. "I'm so sorry I let him do such horrible things to you."

"You didn't know," Alana says, and Will nods.

Then; "Did you?" Hannibal asks.

Margot shakes her head vehemently. "No, I swear I didn't. Mason wouldn't let me see you. He'd bar me from the holding cells, told me it was 'unsafe'. And I started hearing about the caretakers and the other mutants you killed, and I thought 'Maybe he's right'. And when, finally, when I begged Ichi to tell me what he was doing to you, she did, and I was horrified. I snuck to your cell to see you and I don't know if you even knew who I was."

Will presses his lips together. His fingers twitch. "I remember that," he signs, and Alana says. "I remember what your fear smells like."

Margot whimpers, pressing her knuckles to her mouth, her eyes bright and wet. "I didn't leave him," she says, looking to Alana and Hannibal. "I couldn't. I *knew* he had to remember me. So I sat with him and talked to him all night and…"

"I got better," Will signs, and Alana says. "Like a fog had been lifted from my eyes. I remember that."

Margot nods, lowering her hand to reveal a watery smile. "I'll never forgive myself for what he did to you," she says. "But I'm so glad Hannibal took you in. I look at you and I see the person I first met."

Will smiles, just as unsteady. He reaches out and grabs Hannibal's hand, squeezing tightly. He doesn't try to speak to Hannibal, but Hannibal can feel the chaotic mess of his emotions, rutting against his brain like a frantic cat, desperate for affection or food. Hannibal squeezes his hand in turn and tries to emit a sense of calm and safety.

Alana puts a hand on Margot's shoulder and she smiles at Margot when Margot turns to look at her. "Do you think your brother has done this to anyone else?" she asks softly. The kind of softness that comes from snowfall in darkness, where the blood looks black.

Margot shakes her head. "After Will, I couldn't bring myself to look anymore," she says. "But probably. Mason isn't the kind of person to just do something once."

Hannibal hums, looking over at Will. Will doesn't look like he's in distress, which is good, but Hannibal is sure that his brain is a mess of thoughts and feelings right now. If Will needed time alone, outside, Hannibal wouldn't force him to stay.

Then, a thought pushes its way into Hannibal's mind, and Hannibal blinks when he hears Will's voice; "I think she's lying."

Hannibal takes a bite of his food, trying to appear nonchalant. "How so?" he whispers back to Will across their mental link.

"I remember the night she's talking about," Will says. "I don't think she's lying about that. About her regard for me, or about what Mason did to me. I don't think she knows anything about the details." He pauses. "I think she's lying about my nature."

"Why?"

"This kind of thing doesn't just happen, Doctor Lecter," Will growls. "I cannot accept that I was a soft, meek animal before I came to the Vergers, any more than I am now."

Hannibal hums again. "Thank you for sharing with us, Margot," Hannibal says out loud, smiling at her when she meets his gaze. "Is has been very enlightening."

"Yes," Alana adds, nodding.

"I have one more question," Hannibal says. "And I only ask because Will has mentioned it before." Margot nods. "Do you know the name of the woman who was supposed to take over Will's care? Or that of his owner before you and your brother?"

Margot presses her lips together, and nods. "The woman who was supposed to take over Will's care was…. Oh, damn it." She frowns, clucking her tongue. "It was European. Fancy-sounding. Du…something. Du Marche?"

Hannibal frowns. It couldn't possibly be… "Du Maurier?" he asks. "Bedelia Du Maurier?"

"That's it!" Margot says, snapping her fingers. She looks at Hannibal. "Do you know her?"

The shock Hannibal feels must have been strong, because Will winces and pulls his hand away, rubbing at his temple. Alana frowns in concern at Will and Hannibal sits back, trying to process this new information.

Will was supposed to go into Bedelia's care. Since Bedelia already has Anthony, Hannibal can see why she would refuse. But then for Bedelia to be the one to suggest Hannibal's name to Jack, so that he might acquire Will? And if Margot knew her, or had met her at any point, and if Margot has been behind some scheme to put Will in Hannibal's path with the FBI?

An inexcusable amount of coincidences, in Hannibal's opinion.

Hannibal clears his throat, and nods when he realizes Margot's question has gone unanswered. "Yes," he replies. "She is a colleague of mine, and a dear friend."

"I was told she never even met Will," Margot says, somewhat sullenly.

Oh, Hannibal has no doubt of that. She probably never even knew his name – if Will is his original name. Mason had implied he'd changed it when he'd acquired Will. Hannibal wonders if she would know his face, though, when and if Hannibal ever put her in Will's path.

He can feel Will's eyes on him, and he offers his hand again. Will takes it.

"I want to meet her." His mind-voice is dark and angry.

Hannibal smiles. He answers within the confines in his mind so that the women don’t hear; "Yes, I thought you might."

Chapter 14

After dinner, Hannibal serves everyone a glass of port and they retire to the study. Margot and Alana share a couch and Hannibal sits in one of the comfortable armchairs. Will sits with his back to the fire, very close to the heat, his shadow casting a large silhouette on the shelves opposite. He sniffs at the port glass and gives a curious hum before taking a drink. Then, his nose wrinkles and he hands it to Hannibal, who takes it with a laugh.

"Too sweet?" he asks. Will huffs and shrugs one shoulder, and Hannibal pours Will's serving into his own glass and sets Will's empty glass to one side. "I think this might be the first thing I've served you that you didn't like," he adds.

Margot smiles, her eyes on Will. "You liked plums a lot, before," she says. Will blinks at her, cocking his head to one side. "You'd eat them all, no matter how many I gave you. Once you ate a dozen in an hour."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, thinking of how much fiber is in plums. "Somehow that doesn't surprise me," he says. "Will shows a predisposition towards anything fresh."

Margot hums, biting the side of her lower lip. Her eyes get sad again and she swallows her mouthful of port loudly, sighing at the sweet taste. "Mason told me he stopped eating real food after a while," she says. "I'm never allowed in the kitchens, so I couldn't check on the food." She shakes her head. "I think of all the things that I let happen, that I could have stopped. I hate myself for it."

Will lets out a quiet, soothing noise. He meets Margot's eyes and shakes his head. She smiles weakly at him. "Still," she adds, "it's all in the past, I suppose." Her eyes meet Hannibal's. "I'll never be able to repay you for how kind you've been to him, and to me."

"Don't consider it a thing of economic trade," Hannibal replies with a smile. "I treat all my friends kindly."

Margot presses her lips together. "There's one more thing I'd like to ask, if that's okay," she says, and sets her glass down. Will perks up and Hannibal gives her a nod of encouragement. She sits forward, her eyes moving between Hannibal and Will. "Can I see the stag again?"

Will tilts his head to one side, his expressive eyes shadowed with worry. He nods, and his hands move; "If it won't frighten you," Alana says for him.

Margot smiles weakly. "It never has," she says.

Will looks to Hannibal like he's waiting for permission, his expression hopeful and eager. Hannibal smiles. "I see no reason why not," he says, and Will smiles and stands. Hannibal follows suit, and leads the way back into the kitchen and then out onto the porch.

Will touches his hand briefly, gifting Hannibal with a gentle stroke of his mental presence, before he lets go and steps out onto the grass. He sheds his shirt and Hannibal sees Margot

and Alana take their places at Hannibal's side as Will climbs out of his sweatpants, so that he's bare and lovely in the moonlight. His skin, pale as it is, makes him glow until he looks like something from another world, some God-given gift for Hannibal's sight and pleasure.

Will turns his head, meets Hannibal's eye, and smiles. Hannibal smiles back and gives a hum of encouragement, and Will closes his eyes, heaving in a breath. His shoulders roll, and he falls to his knees, breathing heavily.

Hannibal has seen this so many times, but it never fails to take his breath away, like each time he sees Will's change is brand new. Will shudders, his back flexing and skin splitting apart as he makes way for the stag's antlers. He tilts his head up, jaw cracking, and he lifts his hands and rips his lower jaw off, letting it fall to make way for the stag's muzzle. His fingers curl and he rakes them down his neck, letting the stag's scruff and thick hair show through his bloodied skin. His hips widen and shift, his knees snapping backwards, his knuckles cracking apart to make way for the stag's hooves.

Will's body melts, flesh stripped away, and then stag crawls out of the mess, breathing hard and steaming in the cold air. Hannibal blinks in surprise, and beside him, Alana lets out a soft, shocked noise.

"He's white," she murmurs.

And Hannibal sees that she's right. The stag is not black like normal, but a pure, ethereal white, the same color that the stag had first been in Hannibal's vision, when Will first showed him the spider, before Mason had devoured him. Its horns do not shine like onyx and coal, but diamonds, brilliant and dazzling in the porch lights. Its hair and fur is speckled with red and it shakes its pelt and it falls from the stag like water on a mirror, making it shine.

The stag rears up, head swinging down like it intends to skewer some formless predator in front of it, and then it turns, regarding Hannibal, Margot, and Alana with bright blue eyes. It doesn't move to consume Will's meat suit, but stands and stares at them, and Hannibal thinks that if it were to open its mouth, its teeth would not have fangs like the black stag, but be the standard shape for such an animal.

The black stags prowls like a predator, but this one moves like a chaotic blend of light, gentle and warm. It dances.

Hannibal lets out a heavy breath and Margot gives a curious hum, frowning at Alana. "You seem surprised," she says. "He's always been white."

"No," Alana replies, shaking her head. "He hasn't."

"I don't understand," Margot murmurs. "What color have you seen?"

"Black," Hannibal breathes. The stag's ears perk up and it looks at Hannibal, flanks heaving, pretty blue eyes blinking in a slow cat-like motion of pleasure. "He's usually black."

Margot sighs, shakes her head.

Hannibal steps forward and holds out his hand as he has always done. The stag breathes in deeply, ears flicking back, and walks forward until its muzzle is in Hannibal's palm. Its nose is wet and warm, and Hannibal cups the stag's other cheek with his free hand. He notices that, unlike the black stag, this animal's horns are pointed backwards and not forwards – not made to attack, but to defend. How strange.

He tries to reach for Will's mind and sighs when he feels Will's warmth curl up alongside him like a contented cat. "Can you hear me, darling?" he whispers across their mental link.

The stag blinks at him, ears going forward again, and it huffs. Its eyes don't change color. Hannibal sighs, feeling strangely sad at the sight of this pure-white animal. This is a creature without sin, without darkness – this is what Will was before he became a victim of Mason Verger. Another sign that Will's darkness had been made, and is not inherent.

The stag pulls back with a soft noise, and Hannibal drops his hands as he sees Will's human skin overtake the animal's hair again. The stag kneels down, then lies on its side, breathing heavily as its legs shrink back into its body. The forelegs curl, crack backwards to form elbows and wrists, its hooves split apart and become fingers.

He hears Alana's voice; "Let's get back inside. It's freezing out here," she says, and Hannibal doesn't turn to see her and Margot go back in. He hears the porch door slide shut just as Will's human jaw swallows the stag's muzzle. His eyes flash black and he gasps, rolling onto his hands and knees. His fingers go to his hair, shoving the horns back in the final inch with a low growl.

Hannibal kneels in front of him, pulling the white pelt tight over Will's shoulders, before he cups Will's sweaty face. Will looks up, blinking like he's been drugged, the same way he'd looked when Hannibal had first set eyes on him. His eyes don't sharpen.

"Come back to me, Will," Hannibal whispers. Will whimpers, clenching his eyes tightly shut and butting his forehead against Hannibal's chest. Hannibal cradles him close and bows his head to rest his forehead against the stag's pelt.

Then, Will's voice slips into his mind; "That felt unnatural," he says.

Hannibal hums. "How do you mean?"

"I didn't want to scare her," Will replies. "I saw in her mind's eye what I had looked like, before…everything. I knew what she expected to see."

"So you…changed it?" Hannibal asks, his mouth unmoving, simply pushing the thoughts at Will through their mental link. He sits back, still touching Will's face so they can speak, and frowns. "I didn't know you could do that."

Will manages a weak smile. His eyes look sharper now, more focused. "I guess so."

"That means you might be able to shapeshift into other things."

Will huffs a weak laugh. "One challenge at a time, Doctor Lecter." He pulls back and puts his hand in Hannibal's so they can still speak, and looks at the still-steaming pile of his old human flesh. He swallows and bites his lower lip. "I'll clean that up."

"Was that also because Margot was looking?" Hannibal asks.

Will nods, and Hannibal smiles. "You show a remarkable grasp of appealing to how others see you. Or how they want to see you."

"I aim to please," Will says, his smile turning bitter at the edges. Hannibal stands and Will follows suit. "I'll be in in a minute. Can I have some time alone?"

"Of course," Hannibal replies, and kisses Will's forehead. "Come in when you're ready."

Will nods, and pulls Hannibal in for another kiss, this time on his mouth, his lips warm and sweet against Hannibal's for a brief, chaste moment. Then, Hannibal lets him go, and heads back to the study.

Margot is staring into her port glass, her eyes wide and shining with unshed tears. "I never thought I'd see him like that again," she whispers when Hannibal takes his seat opposite her.

"Has he always been that?" Alana asks. "That white stag?"

Margot nods. "Until Mason changed him, I suppose," she replies darkly. She looks at Hannibal. "You say he's a black stag now?" Hannibal nods, and Margot lets out another angry hiss, her knuckles going white around her glass. "That son of a bitch."

"Your devotion to Will is touching," Hannibal says kindly.

Margot nods, her eyes flashing. "He's been my only friend through all of this," she replies. "Or, he was."

"Will has told me much of his life with Mason, and with you," Hannibal says. "He thinks very highly of you. He wants to honor you, and make you proud." Margot smiles. "Forgive me if I'm overstepping, but Mason is the sole heir to your father's fortune, is he not?"

Alana straightens up when Margot nods. "Only a male heir can inherit from him," she says crisply, taking another drink. "My father's will was very explicit about that."

"And yet, Mason has never married, or had children."

She shakes her head. "My brother is not exactly the apple-pie kind of person, Doctor -. Hannibal," she says.

Hannibal smiles. "Are you?"

"My proclivities don't exactly lend me to breeding," Margot says. "Though I'm sure it would delight Mason if I ever did have a baby."

Alana raises her eyebrows. Her gaze is sharp, but contemplative. Hannibal can see her mind ticking away much in the same way Will's does when his eyes take in a room. Margot sighs and shrugs one shoulder. "Maybe he'll find a woman one day who doesn't bore him. God bless her soul if she can bear him for nine months."

Hannibal smiles, and thinks of what Will told him of the secret child in Margot's fort. "Your parents' fortune is vast, your properties numerous," he says. Margot lifts her eyes, pressing her lips together, and nods. "I imagine it wouldn't be difficult to keep a secret. Until it was convenient to reveal it."

Margot swallows, her eyes wide. She clears her throat and finishes her glass, setting it down, before she stands. Hannibal and Alana follow suit. "Thank you for dinner, Hannibal," she says warmly, embracing him in a quick hug. "I shall have to come by more often, especially if you keep indulging my diet."

"You are always welcome, Margot," Hannibal says, and walks her to the door. "Are you okay to drive?"

"Oh, I'm quite alright," Margot replies. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes are bright, but Hannibal trusts her to get home safely. Alana takes her coat as well and shrugs it on and Hannibal gives her a kiss on the cheek. They both walk out, side-by-side, and Hannibal smiles, wondering if Margot is going to be spending the night at her home after all.

He comes back into the kitchen as Will re-enters. His feet are dirty and he's back in his clothes, his mouth smeared pink with the remains of his old flesh. The white pelt is laid out on the patio chairs. Will smiles at Hannibal and lets out a soft purr, putting his cheek in Hannibal's palm when Hannibal reaches for him.

"You never cease to amaze me," Hannibal murmurs, curling his hand in Will's hair and bringing him close so he can kiss his forehead.

Will hums, smiling more widely, and grazes his fingers down Hannibal's wrist. "Is your curiosity satisfied, Doctor Lecter?" he asks.

"In the respect to your past, somewhat," Hannibal replies. "But now I have new questions. The fact that Bedelia was meant to inherit you, sold you to the Vergers, and then happened to conduct the intervention that led me to your purchase concerns me."

"Concern," Will repeats. "I don't know if what I feel should be called 'concern'."

"What would you call it, then?"

"…Helplessness," Will says, lifting his gaze, his fingers still on Hannibal's wrist. "Is this how humans feel when they think that free will and consciousness mean nothing? I thought you had purchased me because of the FBI, because of my gifts, and yet I have proven less than useful to them, except when it comes to Mason Verger. Again, I smell a spider."

"A black spider, like Mason?" Hannibal asks. "Or his sister?"

Will shakes his head, sighing. "You know, there are some species of spider that eat other ones," he says. "They're harmless to humans, but they destroy other spiders that might kill them. Like daddy longlegs or hunter spiders."

"You seem to know a lot about different kinds of animals," Hannibal notes.

Will smiles. "My metaphors stem from what I know," he says. "Ni breeds them, you know. Spiders. Or she lets them nest in her room and studies them. She told me all about them. There are some that form symbiotic relationships with other animals to their benefit. I think Margot is that kind of spider."

"I think so, too," Hannibal replies. "If Mason Verger is trying to create a web of mutants with murderers for owners, it wouldn't surprised me if Margot was trying to intervene. She knows I had ties to the police, she leaked the information that would garner the FBI's interest. She led me right to you."

Will hums. "And you will lead Jack to Mason," he replies. Then, he cocks his head to one side, and his expression and voice gets dark. "I don't want him arrested," he hisses. "I want my old master dead, or worse."

Hannibal smiles. He cups Will's face with both hands and kisses him gently. "I will do everything in my power to make that happen."

Will whines into the kiss, wrapping tender fingers in Hannibal's clothes. He bites his lip when they pull away for air, like he wants to ask for something but is afraid of the response. Hannibal can feel his mental heat, rubbing up against Hannibal's mind ardently, desperately seeking his touch and affection.

"What is it, Will?" Hannibal asks.

Will swallows, lowering his eyes, and rests his forehead against Hannibal's chest. "I don't want to sleep away from you," he says.

Hannibal smiles, overcome with joy and affection at Will's soft confession. "You can sleep in my room," he says, and Will lets out a shaky breath. "If you agree to do something for me."

"Anything," Will breathes.

Hannibal reaches into his pocket and takes out the whistle. Will's eyes flash, he goes tense, but he doesn't pull away. "One more short session, Will," Hannibal says, soft and coaxing as he pets through Will's hair. "I told you I wouldn't back down from this. You must learn control, and if you want to be near me while I am asleep and unable to react quickly enough, my doubts about your self-control must be put at ease."

Will swallows, before he sets his jaw and his eyes flash with determination. He meets Hannibal's gaze, ready and battle-calm. "Alright."

Hannibal leads him upstairs and draws him a bath. "Get undressed, darling," he says, and sheds his waistcoat and rolls the sleeves of his shirt up to his forearms while Will obeys. Will sinks into the scalding hot water with a hiss, his eyes on Hannibal as Hannibal lays a towel down and kneels beside the bath.

Will reaches out and touches his arm. "You don't have to stay there," he says, nervous but eager. His eyes are shining, pupils large and dark.

Hannibal looks at him for a long moment, before he nods. He stands, unbuttoning and unrolling his sleeves, before he unbuttons the front of his shirt and shrugs it off, folding it and setting it on the closed toilet lid. His undershirt goes next, untucked and pulled over his head to bare his chest.

Will lets out a soft sound, sitting forward in the bath so he can watch Hannibal undress. Hannibal lets him stare, strangely excited to bare himself to Will's ravenous gaze. Even though they aren't touching, it's like he can still feel Will's mental presence, and wonders if this is the beginning of Will being able to communicate with him without touch. Will's need for him, his desire, is enchanting and magnetic, pulling Hannibal close to him through a force as strong as gravity and time.

Hannibal unbuttons and unzips his suit pants, pushing them down along with his underwear and stepping out of them, so that he is as naked as Will. He takes the whistle from his pocket as he folds the rest of his clothes and sets it down on the lip of the bath. Will curls his fingers over it, so it doesn’t fall.

Will slides forward in the bath, the water sloshing around him, and Hannibal climbs in behind him. His bath is large enough to fit them well enough, his feet touching the end of the basin and Will's knees bent up, so they are not submerged.

Will settles between his legs, against his chest, and sighs. With this much skin touching, it feels less like Will is brushing up against the walls of his mind, and more that he has bled completely into Will. He is momentarily unable to tell where his thoughts end and Will's begin. Will's mind is a red haze in front of his eyes, blistering with love and adoration, and Hannibal closes his eyes, overwhelmed with it for a brief moment.

He wraps his arms around Will's chest and cradles him close, enjoying the intimacy in the hot water. His skin is pink with heat and where Hannibal is not covered with the water, he's starting to sweat. It's a damp, messy need he feels, echoed and mirrored in Will. He flattens a hand on Will's chest, over his pounding heart, and then gently coaxes the whistle free from Will's grip.

Will tilts his head back onto Hannibal's shoulder, his eyes closed, his throat flexing, shoulders tense. "Are you ready, darling?" Hannibal whispers, nuzzling the curl of hair around the edge of his ear.

Will bites his lower lip. His hands are on the edge of the bathtub, white-knuckled and fingers flexing. He nods.

Hannibal smiles, and lifts the whistle to his lips. He blows through it and Will gasps, arching violently enough that the water splashes over the edge of the tub and onto the towel. Hannibal tightens his arm around Will's chest and stops blowing through the whistle, flattening his hand over Will's.

"You're alright," he whispers, closing his eyes when he hears Will whimper. The red haze of Will's thoughts pulses and Hannibal sees flashes in front of his eyes: blood; bright lights; the eyes of a dying man as he's skewered on Will's antlers. Will whimpers again, trembling in Hannibal's hold.

Hannibal shushes him, strokes his hand up Will's chest and wraps his fingers tight around Will's throat. He can feel the thickness there of the stag, but doesn't hear Will's jaw cracking like it did the last time. "Good boy," he purrs, and Will shivers. His eyes open and they're black, staring at the ceiling. "You're already learning control. I can feel it. I know you're trying to make me proud." Will swallows harshly and the thickness in his throat feels like it's ebbing, no longer as swollen. Hannibal strokes his thumb over Will's hammering pulse and blows through the whistle again.

Will moans, curling up in Hannibal's arms, a thin streak of black running from his nose. "Control it, Will," Hannibal growls. "I'm not going to hurt you. You know I would never hurt you."

Will shudders, turning his face into Hannibal's neck. He bares his teeth and it almost feels like he's going to bite, but he forces his jaws tight together. He lifts one hand from underneath Hannibal's and fists it in Hannibal's hair, back arching when Hannibal shushes him again.

Words flash into Hannibal's head with Will's voice, but they're fragments, hardly coherent thoughts. They snap and flare like matches, burning out just as quickly in the chaotic red and black of Will's mind. Hannibal feels parts of him throb and tighten like the visual manifestation of an audio track. Will writhes against him and Hannibal growls, gritting his teeth and tightening his hand on Will's neck when Will moans.

It's a desperate, aching sound, and it jars something in Hannibal's gut when he hears it. He's only a man, and he's not unaware of the intimate way their bodies are pressed together. It's impossible to ignore when Will's warm, soft flesh is rutting against him so desperately, like the only shelter and sanctuary Will can gain lies in Hannibal's chest.

Hannibal hisses when Will gasps, licking over his neck like the taste of Hannibal's skin is the only thing that can calm him. Hannibal slides his hand down Will's throat, through the hot water melted to Will's stomach. He wonders if he should stop, pull away before he crosses a point he cannot come back from.

But Will whimpers against him, and a single word presses into his mind like a knife to the heart; "*Please*."

Hannibal's hand stops on Will's lower stomach, where it's tense. He's trembling, thighs spread as much as they can be in the tub. "Is this what you want?" he asks into Will's mind.

Will nods, frantic, needy, desperate. He nuzzles Hannibal's neck and licks his throat again. "Touch me," he begs, petting through Hannibal's hair. "*Please*."

Hannibal can't resist. He doesn't *want* to resist. He puts his hand just that little bit lower and wraps his fingers loosely around Will's cock, and blows through the whistle one more time.

Will's broken cry whips through his brain and Will arches, his cock twitching in Hannibal's grip. He throws his head back and his free hand claws at Hannibal's thigh, his canines flashing in the light. He's beautiful, rapturous in the carnal war of instincts slamming through his head. And Hannibal feels it all – he feels Will's desire to flee, his urge to fight, and below that, the prowling desire and desperation that flares at Hannibal's touch.

Hannibal lets the whistle drop onto the sodden towel and puts his hand on Will's neck, turns his head and cups his jaw as he kisses Will and tightens his grip on Will's cock. Will whimpers, his hips rolling, and he kisses Hannibal with all the passion and desire of a reunited lost love. He kisses Hannibal fiercely, meets him blow for blow as Hannibal strokes his cock, and Hannibal slides his hand from Will's neck to his chest to feel his pounding heart.

It goes beyond intimacy. Will is in Hannibal's head, his desire and his lust soaking Hannibal like blood into fur. This is more than simple connection – this is something Hannibal knows he would never achieve with anyone else. Will is in his head; the walls and forts and barriers lie in shambles around them both and they touch each other on the smoldering ruins of a conquered kingdom. Hannibal not only feels Will's desire but knows that Will feels his. The arousal, the love that Will feels for him is all-consuming and powerful and Hannibal finds himself wading deep into the water and letting it drown him.

Will goes tense, stifling a moan against Hannibal's mouth. He trembles, breath catching, and Hannibal smiles when he feels Will's cock twitch, feels the hot spurt of his release in the water. Will's relief and adoration burn him from the inside out and Hannibal shudders, pleasure and satisfaction washing over him as powerfully as if he'd been the one to orgasm.

He pulls his hand from Will's cock and takes his hand, holds it to Will's hammering heart as Will gasps and purrs. He breaks the kiss with another raw noise, his eyes black but fading back to their original color slowly. He rests his head on Hannibal's shoulder, blinking up at the ceiling, lax and sated, and Hannibal gently wipes the small line of black from under his nose.

Hannibal smiles, kissing his sweaty hair. He realizes abruptly that his own body is twitching with the aftershocks of an orgasm. Will's release, it seems, was powerful enough to trigger his own. He holds Will tightly in the cooling water, unwilling and unable to let him move. Will seems just as content to lie with him, purring loudly in the otherwise silent room as Hannibal catches his breath and lets his own heart slow.

Will sighs, closing his eyes. "It feels like I've been waiting for you to touch me for a thousand years," he whispers.

Hannibal smiles, pleased beyond belief at hearing Will's mind-voice, sated and content and brimming with joy. It's an emotion he is feeling too, and he lifts one hand to pet through

Will's hair, soaking the strands and pushing it back from his sweaty forehead.

"You've made me very happy," he replies, and Will's breath catches. He swallows and makes a noise like he'll do anything in the world to see Hannibal smile. "I cannot think of a single place I'd rather be than in this moment with you."

Will smiles, wide and bright, and turns his head to kiss Hannibal again. "I love you," he says, gentle and adoring.

Hannibal lets out a soft sound of pleasure, cups Will's neck, and kisses him back. "And I adore you," he replies. Will's thoughts are no longer red, but golden, as pure and beautiful as the all the cathedrals and chapels in Italy. "I will make it so that you never have to be afraid again, my darling boy."

Will purrs, warmth and affection pulsing through their bond. "I know. Thank you. For everything."

Hannibal smiles. "It's my pleasure."

Chapter 15

Hannibal stirs, waking from pleasant dreams of green fields and bright sunshine. Will is cradled against his chest, his eyes closed though Hannibal suspects he's not really asleep, a soft smile on his lovely face. His cheeks are pink from the heat in Hannibal's room, the blankets pulled up tight to his neck despite the warmth, like he wants to cocoon himself in it.

Hannibal smiles and presses a gentle kiss to Will's neck, tightening his arms around Will's chest, and Will hums, his mental presence sharpening and stretching out like a cat in front of a fireplace, trying to get as much warmth in its fur as possible. "Good morning, Doctor Lecter," he murmurs, and Hannibal smiles affectionately when he hears Will's mind-voice is hoarse as it would be if he was speaking aloud and had just woken up.

"Good morning, Will," he replies, gently pushing the words back into Will's head. The heavy curtains in his room are drawn shut, so the only light is what is coming from the bottom of the curtains. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Will replies. He opens his eyes, blinking once, slowly, and turns his head to meet Hannibal's gaze. "Did you?"

"A product of your design, I believe."

Will smiles, turning within Hannibal's arms and gently touching Hannibal's jaw. "We'll need to get up soon," he says, pressing closer. "I need to give Jack the sketch of the mutant girl's owner's face."

Hannibal nods, pressing his lips together. He straightens up, his weight on one elbow, and pets through Will's hair just to watch Will's eyelids flutter. "If the man came here to sell his mutant, he likely won't remain in Maryland since the deal is off."

"Unless my old master asked him to stay," Will replies. "As a guest."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "Do you think he would?"

"I think Mason Verger likes making friends," Will murmurs. His eyes are on Hannibal's mouth. He swallows. "He's a true extrovert."

"I realize now how blind I must have been," Hannibal says, speaking out loud. "I knew what he was doing. I knew what kind of things he was capable of. I didn't see him as a threat to myself, so I ignored it. How many creatures like you has he claimed and perverted? How many people own monsters and are in his debt."

Will frowns, a flicker of worry passing between his consciousness and Hannibal's. "Do you… think I'm perverted?" he asks. "A monster?"

Hannibal smiles. "Of course not, my dear," he replies, gently cradling Will's cheek. "Not to me."

Will sighs. "But to some."

"It's the way of the world, I'm afraid," Hannibal murmurs. He leans in, puts his nose to Will's soft hair and kisses his forehead. Will makes a low, pleased sound, his fingers curling against Hannibal's jaw as he arches closer, seeking his warmth. "There are sheep, and then there are those that consume the sheep."

Will hums, and pulls back reluctantly. "I would rather be a hunter," he says, and Hannibal's smile widens.

"Get up and get dressed. I will make us something to eat, and we will go see Jack as soon as you're ready."

Will nods, and they rise from bed. Hannibal changes from the t-shirt and lounge pants he'd donned after Will's bath, into one of his suits, and goes downstairs as Will heads to the bathroom. There are no leftovers from last night's dinner, Hannibal notes with pleasure, but the ground meat from the dead man will make a nice morning fry-up. He couples the meat with eggs, chilis, and green peppers as he listens to the floorboards creak above his head.

He takes his phone as the food is cooking and calls Doctor Sutcliffe. The man answers on the fourth ring. "This is Doctor Sutcliffe," he greets.

"Good morning, Donald," Hannibal replies brightly.

"…Hannibal? Well, I'll be damned," Doctor Sutcliffe replies. Hannibal hears him walking around, presumably in his own home. "To what do I owe this impromptu call?"

"I'm sorry to bother you on a weekend, but I was hoping to call in a favor," Hannibal says. He receives a curious hum. "I need an MRI."

"…For any particular person? Or diagnosis?" Doctor Sutcliffe says.

"I would like it to be discreet," Hannibal says, lifting his eyes as Will comes into the room. He smiles at Will and cradles the phone against his cheek as he finishes with the food and serves out half of it onto a plate each, handing one to Will with a fork. He makes a gesture for Will to eat and Will sits at one of the bar stools at the kitchen island, digging in readily.

"We are men of discretion," Doctor Sutcliffe replies mildly. "But I take it you would rather I avoid making an appointment, then," he adds.

Hannibal smiles. "You'd be correct," he says. "I have recently purchased a mutant, and I want to make sure he has a clean bill of health."

Doctor Sutcliffe hums. "A mutant, you say?" he asks. "I didn't peg you for the type."

"Please let me know when you'd be available to give him an MRI."

"I'll be in the office today," he says. "Sundays are relatively quiet. Can you bring him by later?"

"Of course. Thank you, Donald. I shall see you soon." He hangs up and grabs his own plate, standing as he turns to Will and begins to eat. Will makes a soft sound of question. "That was my friend at the hospital. He has agreed to perform an MRI on you. Hopefully, we will be able to identify where the tracking chip is. With any luck it will be in a place from which it can be easily removed."

Will lowers his gaze, swallowing his mouthful of food loudly. He reaches out and Hannibal lets their fingers graze. "And it won't hurt?"

Hannibal shakes his head. "MRI's are painless," he replies. "You will lay down and be placed in a large cylindrical pod. The machine will scan you and take images of your body and your brain. I will be able to identify anything out of the ordinary."

Will hums. "I imagine a lot of me will be out of the ordinary," he replies.

Hannibal smiles, pulling his hand back so he can continue eating. "Thankfully I know what I'm looking for."

Will nods, finishing his plate. His nails drum on the countertop and he looks outside, his eyes bright in the morning light streaking in from the porch doors. He licks his fork and sets it down on his plate. Hannibal finishes his food and takes both plates, setting them with their forks in the sink, and leaves the pan on the stove to cool down before he washes it.

He goes to Will and takes him by the hair, drawing him into a chaste kiss. "Are you ready?" he asks, and Will smiles, nodding. "Alright. Let's not delay any further."

Hannibal leads Will to the FBI Behavioral Unit offices, coming to a halt when he sees Jack in what looks like tense conversation with Beverly Katz. Beverly sees them first and abruptly falls silent, folding her arms across her chest and nodding past Jack so that he turns and sees them.

Will ducks his head, shrinking back behind Hannibal's arm. He touches Hannibal's wrist. "He smells angry," he whispers to Hannibal.

"Good morning, Jack," Hannibal says when Jack approaches them, his eyes dark and his face grim. He can't remember the last time he saw the man smile, and wonders if he remembers how to. "Will is here to give you the sketch of the mutant owner."

"Good," Jack says, rubbing a hand over his mouth. "Good…" He sounds distracted. "Would you mind calling Alana? I have to speak to Will."

Hannibal cocks his head to one side. He debates telling Jack that they have no need for Alana, that Hannibal can understand him just fine, but he decides against it. That is one secret he would like to keep for a little while longer. "Of course," he says, and takes out his phone. "May I ask what you'll be speaking to him about? I'm sure she'll want to know."

"I want to know that killer's M.O.," Jack says as he leads the way into one of the interrogation rooms. "There's been another murder. I want to confirm it's not the same guy."

Hannibal raises his eyebrows and Will looks between them, frantically. He doesn't try to reach out to Hannibal as Hannibal dials Alana's number.

"Hannibal?"

"Good morning, Alana," Hannibal says. "I'm with Jack at the BSU. He has requested you to act as a translator while he questions Will about another murder."

"…questions him?" she repeats. "I'm on my way."

"Yes. Please come down as soon as you are able," Hannibal replies. "Thank you." He hangs up as Jack pushes into the interrogation room, where Hannibal sees Miss Jameson is already seated. She smiles warmly at Will and Will returns it, giving her a nod as he sits opposite her. Jack and Hannibal remain standing.

"Good to see you again, Will," Miss Jameson says gently, affectionately, and Hannibal wonders if Will spoke to her or showed her more than just the Angel-maker last time he touched her. She looks at Will like he is a precious child.

Will smiles at her. He points to her and lifts up two fingers, before he holds out his hand. She takes it eagerly, and Will's eyes go black.

Hannibal swallows, feeling strangely jealous as he watches Miss Jameson's eyes change as well. He shouldn't be jealous, of course, but watching Will touch other people's minds is not something he has had to see too often, and when it's not a dead person and not himself, he finds that he is strangely possessive of Will's ability. Will is *his*.

Miss Jameson gasps, and Will withdraws his hand, his eyes going back to normal. His hands are shaking and he's swallowing harshly, his pupils large despite the harsh lights in the interrogation room, and Hannibal goes tense.

Will closes his eyes, letting out a weak whimper that Hannibal recognizes intimately now. It's the sound Will makes when he's trying to maintain control of himself.

"I notice you don't collar and mask him anymore," Jack mutters as Miss Jameson starts her sketch.

Hannibal shakes his head. "I don't see a need," he says, loud enough for Will to hear; a reminder. "I have been attempting to teach him to control and refine his abilities, so they do not distress him so much. And he's no threat to me."

"It's not you I'm worried about," Jack says darkly.

"Tell me about this murder," Hannibal says. "Why do you think Will would know anything about it?"

"Just covering all my bases, Doctor Lecter," Jack replies coolly. "Will claims there was a serial killer on the plane. Need to know just how many I should worry about in my town."

Hannibal hums.

Miss Jameson sets her pencil down and turns the paper to show Will. He smiles tightly, nodding at her, and gives her a thumbs up. "Here you are, Agent Crawford," she says, standing and handing Jack the sketch.

"Thank you, Miss Jameson," Jack murmurs, and she leaves with another nod and a smile in Will's direction. Will offers her a small wave and she leaves the room.

Hannibal looks at the sketch, one eyebrow rising. "A distinctive face," he says, nodding to the visible scar on the man's upper lip. "Cleft palate surgery, perhaps. Or an old deformity."

Jack hums. "I'll run this through the flight records from your plane, see if anything comes up a match," he says.

Will makes a soft noise, and Hannibal cocks his head to one side as he opens his hands, mimicking reading a book, then runs a finger across his throat, and then points downstairs. "I…believe Will is asking if you need him to read the body," he says, and Will smiles and nods.

Jack shakes his head. Hannibal's phone chimes and he takes it out to see a text from Alana. "Alana is here," he says.

"I'll go get her," Jack replies shortly, and leaves the room. Hannibal takes a seat opposite Will, smiling when Will reaches out to him, and their fingers lace.

"He doesn't trust me," Will says.

Hannibal smiles, shaking his head. "Not yet," he replies.

"I imagine after how Jimmy, Brian, and Beverly reacted, it will take a masterpiece to want him to keep working with me."

"He told me that he still wants to make use of you, that the Director hasn't given up." Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "You can still work for them, if that's what you want."

Will's brow furrows. "You say that like I shouldn't want to," he says quietly.

Hannibal cannot reply, as the door opens and he turns, pulling his hand from Will's as Jack and Alana enter. Without Jack knowing about the psychic capabilities Will has, he's sure it looks strange that Hannibal is just sitting and holding his mutant's hand in silence.

Alana smiles at him and shakes Hannibal's hand, before she takes the seat where Hannibal was sitting. Hannibal circles the table and sits next to Will and Jack takes the fourth seat, opposite Hannibal. He has a case file in his hand.

"The body was found washed up on the shores of a river, about ten miles from here," Jack says, opening the file and turning it so Will can see. Will hums, pulling it towards him, his fingertips gently touching the photographs. "There were remains of an almost lethal amount of heroin in his system."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "Almost?" he asks.

"It didn't kill him," Jack confirms. "The body was also covered in wax and looked like had been stitched to something. His skin was peeled off in places and we found remains of other skin types stuck to him. So far we've managed to tie the samples to three other missing persons."

Will frowns, looking up. His hands move. "Do you have their pictures?" Alana asks.

Jack nods and opens another file, showing DMV photographs of two women and another man. Different ethnicities, different social backgrounds and employment. Hannibal cocks his head to one side. "All missing from Maryland?" he asks.

Jack shakes his head. "It looks like our killer is a traveler," he replies.

Will hums, looking back down at the man. There's a nasty head wound to the back of his skull, showing pieces of his brain. "He didn't die from the drugs, then?" Will signs, and Alana says.

Jack shakes his head. "No. Looks like our guy tried to run, fell into the river. Water probably killed him. We're thinking the head wound was from the initial capture, and then the guy… did whatever else he did here. I have people canvasing the river bank where he was found."

Will nods. "I need to read the body," he signs, and Alana says.

Jack presses his lips together, sitting back, and regards Will levelly for a long, long moment. Long enough that Hannibal can tell Will starts to get nervous. "Does this M.O. match the killer you saw on the plane?" he asks.

Will shakes his head.

Jack huffs. "Then I'll call you if I need you."

Will makes a short, aggravated sound. His hands move quickly. "If we wait too long, that body will be useless," he says. "And that's assuming he's fresh enough as it is. I want to be useful to you, but I can't if you won't let me."

Jack doesn't answer.

Will growls, and looks down at the photograph again. "He has the same profile as the others," he signs, and Alana says. "He lived alone, disappeared from home, and if the killer uses heroin to subdue his victims, I sense other bodies may be the same. This victim wasn't unstrung; he was ripped from his moorings." Will lifts his eyes. "Whatever his imperfection, it was enough to aggravate the killer into tearing him down."

"Imperfection?" Jack repeats.

Will nods. He takes the photographs from the other three files and lays them out in a line. One of them is a white woman, one an Asian man, one a Hispanic woman, and finally this one. "It's a color wheel," Will signs. "He's creating a mural."

Alana raises an eyebrow. "You think this is a race thing?"

Will shakes his head. "Race implies discrimination," Hannibal replies. "If that were the case, there would be something different about how he kills them or deals with them. There's nothing here to suggest he treats any of them differently because of skin color."

"Oh, so you're a psychic now, too?" Jack says.

Hannibal smiles and sets a hand on Will's thigh, squeezing gently. "Will isn't psychic, Jack," he says. "I think he's made it perfectly clear what he needs to be able to help you."

"Nevertheless, there are actual people I have to consider first, Doctor Lecter," Jack says shortly. He stands, taking the files back. "Thank you for your time. I'll call you if I need you."

He leaves, and Will sits back, his eyes flashing in aggravation. His hand twitches like he wants to make a gesture that would require very little translation, and Alana smiles tightly. "Do you think he'll cave?" she asks.

Hannibal sighs and shakes his head. "Doubtful," he replies. "I'm sorry to have called you here on a Sunday. I didn't want Jack to know about Will's communicative abilities, just yet."

"I understand. I, ah, wasn't doing anything. So."

Will cocks his head to one side, then lifts his chin, nostrils flaring as he scents the air. Alana's cheeks turn pink when he meets her eyes, and he smiles. He reaches out and touches Hannibal's hand. "She was with Margot last night," he says.

"Hey! None of that psychic crap in front of me!" Alana says, batting their hands away from each other. Hannibal huffs a laugh and stands.

Will follows suit, and the three of them leave the interrogation room and almost collide with Beverly.

She looks nervous, her arms folded across her chest and her gaze constantly looking over her shoulder. "Look," she says, and looks between Hannibal and Will. "Jack will absolutely have my ass for this, but I didn't know what else to do." She looks at Will. "Body's time of death was last night, around eight. That fresh enough for you?"

Will blinks, and nods, looking eager.

Beverly presses her lips together. "Jimmy and Brian are out to lunch," she says. "Follow me."

She leads them down to the coroner's, pushing open the door to reveal the dead man's body. The place smells strangely of old wax and decay and Hannibal wrinkles his nose. "Make it

quick," Beverly says, looking down the hallway again. "Please. Anything you think will help."

Will smiles, nodding, and takes in a deep breath as he approaches the dead man on the table. He has been largely untouched, it seems – there is little difference between the photographs Jack showed them and how he appears now.

Will comes to a stop at the side of the dead man, and looks at Hannibal over his shoulder. He seems nervous, and Hannibal understands; this will be the first body he read without his mask and collar, and he's afraid of how he might react. Hannibal imagines the man felt a lot of fear in his final moments.

Will clenches his jaw, rolls his shoulders, and sighs, nodding once to himself. Then, he reaches out and cups the dead man's face.

His eyes go black and he shivers, a choked-off cry sitting in his throat. He bares his teeth as the dead man starts to twitch, then moan, his arms coming up and pushing at Will's shoulders like he's trying to fight him off.

Alana puts a hand to her throat, swallowing harshly.

Will flinches, and growls as he grabs the dead man more tightly. His nails dig into his face and new blood spills out, coloring the wax and marring the design. He gasps, and lifts his face like he's staring through the ceiling. His eyes remain black and Hannibal can see the black ooze running from the corners of his slack mouth.

"Hannibal," Alana says urgently, "do something."

Will's jaw cracks and Hannibal swallows, striding forward and wrapping a hand around Will's neck. He feels fur where Will's neck has started to split. "You're alright," he whispers. It's difficult to keep a hold on Will, with the dead man shoving him and Will trying hard to fight the stag back. "It's already happened, Will. You're not in danger. You're alright. I'm here."

He puts his other hand in Will's hair and tugs on it and Will moans, clenching his eyes tightly shut. Hannibal doesn't try to mentally seek him out, unsure of what he'll find. He hears ragged breathing and isn't sure which of them is making the noise.

"I'm here," he whispers again, pressing his face to Will's hair. "Nothing is happening to you. Control it." There's black blood on his hand from Will's neck and Will whimpers, his ruined throat forcing out the sound. His jaw rights itself, swallowing back the stag, and he feels Will's neck lose its thickness. "That's it. That's wonderful, Will. Good."

Will whines again, and a vision slams into the backs of Hannibal's eyes. He looks up and sees a circle of the night sky, feels where it's like his skin is peeling at the neck, at the thigh. Like he's the dead man, ripping himself from his brethren.

"The killer didn't do this," Will's voice tells him. "He ran."

"Get us out of here," Hannibal demands, and reality slams back into them as Will lets the dead man go, breathing heavily. Will collapses to his knees and Hannibal covers him, keeping his hand in Will's hair and around his neck as Will whimpers and claws at his own skin like he's trying to tear the sutures out.

"What did you see?" Beverly asks.

Will shakes his head, gasping heavily. He opens his eyes when Hannibal pulls back and they're still black, he's still lost in the vision. "Come back to me, darling," he says, too quietly for the women to hear. He cups Will's face and Will whines, his wax-covered hands circling Hannibal's wrists. There's still black in his teeth, coating his chin where it leaked out.

Beverly checks her watch and goes tense. "You guys should go," she says. "I need to clean the body before Jimmy and Brian get back."

Hannibal stands. He doesn't have the luxury of waiting for Will to come back. "Tell Jack to search for grain stores," he tells her, taking Will's hand and leading the way back to the elevators. "And to search further upstream. The man didn't die where you found him. He escaped, and ran."

"Will showed you that?" Alana asks, hurrying to keep up and only relaxing when all four of them are in the elevators.

Will moans, raking his hands across his neck like he's trying to make way for the stag again. Hannibal pulls Will under his arm and settles his hand over Will's nape. "I saw it," Hannibal says. His heart is beating quickly, adrenaline and fear touching him in a way it seldom has before. He knows it's leftover from the dead man, but knowing doesn't make it any less real or effective. "The FBI is going to find a lot more bodies when they find the place."

"Grain stores," Beverly murmurs. "Right. That narrows it down."

"It's a start," Hannibal replies.

"Thanks, guys," Beverly says as the doors open. "I can take it from here. Thank you, Will."

Will nods, shaky and weak and clinging to Hannibal tightly. Hannibal takes him out to the car, Alana close behind, and he presses Will to the side of the car so that he can see Will's face.

Will's eyes are still black, and he clutches at Hannibal's clothes tightly, whining. Hannibal wonders what he's still seeing.

"Hannibal," Alana says, quiet and low and worried. "Why isn't he changing back?"

"I don't know," Hannibal replies tightly. He cups Will's face and tries to find Will's irises amidst the black. "Will," he says, more commanding, trying to regain control. "Will. Come back to me."

Will shudders, sucking in a deep breath. He closes his eyes and moans, his knees buckling, but Hannibal doesn't let him fall.

"We need to take him somewhere," Hannibal says. "Somewhere he can shift."

Alana nods. "There's a park nearby, with running trails. It's worth a shot."

Hannibal nods, and opens the back door, pushing Will to climb in. "Can you drive?" he asks. "I need to keep him calm, make sure he doesn't change on the way."

"Of course."

Chapter 16

Hannibal cradles Will in the back seat, his hand wrapped tight around the front of Will's throat. He has a scarf shielding his skin from Will's, unwilling to be pulled into his mental presence until Will is calmer. Will keeps whimpering, his eyes still black and staring at the back of the seat in front of him. Hannibal pets through his hair and curls up over Will, more frantic than he'd care to admit.

"You're alright, darling," he whispers, and Will gasps, clawing at Hannibal's hand through his scarf. He bares his sharp teeth, his eyes unblinking. They don't change. "Will, I'm here. I'm right here. You're safe. You're with me and Alana. Nothing bad is happening to you."

Will whines. He reaches up to try and touch Hannibal and Hannibal sits back, pushing his hand away. Will moans, curling up more tightly in the back seat. "Alana, are we close?" Hannibal asks.

"Almost there," Alana says tensely, honking at the person in front of them. "Light's green, asshole! Get off your phone!"

Hannibal presses his lips together, looking out of the window as he sees a sign for a park up ahead. Alana turns down the road. There are a lot of people gathered in the parking lot, and she drives towards the back of it where it's less densely populated, and closer to the tree line. Hannibal unravels the scarf from around his hand and wraps it tightly around Will's neck, knotting it at the base of his throat.

"Come on, Will," he says when the car is parked, and Alana kills the engine. He gets out of the car and pulls Will close to him, tucking him under his shoulder. Will staggers, stumbling, hardly able to remain upright. Alana puts her hands on his shoulders and together they practically drag Will into the trees. Hannibal is sure it doesn't look like the most innocuous thing, but Will's safety is paramount to him. He can explain most things away.

They get him to the trees and within them, until Hannibal can't easily see the rest of the park and there don't appear to be any running trails nearby. Will drops to his knees, breathing heavily, and Hannibal unties the scarf and pulls it free.

He pets through Will's hair and kisses the top of his head. "Change, darling," he commands. "You're safe."

Will groans, falling to his hands and knees. His jaw cracks and splits apart. He starts to cough, spitting up human teeth, and digs his claws into his hair to tear it out and make way for his horns. Hannibal didn't have time to undress him. He watches as Will's stag form splits his clothes and flesh apart, creating a macabre array of steaming skin and meat around him. The stag's head emerges from his jaws, the animal bellowing loudly like it's in pain. It's all black as Hannibal is used to seeing, and he watches as Will snaps his own wrists, tugs off his skin like he's pulling off a glove, and lets it fall as his fingers crumble and become hooves.

The stag crawls from his flesh, shaking off the blood and organ meat clinging to its hair. Alana winces, stepping back so that he doesn't hit her. Hannibal's shoes are splattered with blood.

The stag pulls itself from Will's body like a lizard forcing its way out of its own egg, and when it's free, it parts its jaws, revealing large, sharp teeth. It huffs, lowering its horns and dragging them down the bark of a nearby tree, shedding the bark with a loud splintering sound like it's trying to sharpen its horns.

Alana makes a low, worried sound, and takes Hannibal's hand. "Is it safe to be here?" she whispers.

Hannibal nods. "Will would never harm me," he replies. "Or you."

The stag goes still, its flanks heaving with unsteady, deep breaths, and then it straightens up. Its head turns, and it gazes at Hannibal with dark, intelligent eyes, before it bows its regal head and lets out a sound that Hannibal would identify as ashamed.

The stag huffs, and turns so that it can devour Will's flesh and clothes. It licks up and swallows his teeth, leaving nothing but his blood-stained shoes behind. Hannibal comes forward to retrieve them and wraps them in his scarf, before he hands them to Alana. "Take your time, Will," he tells the stag. This had been one of the worst episodes he's ever seen, and if Will needs time to let the stag free, then Hannibal will allow it. He imagines it feels good to Will, especially after their training sessions where he'd tried to teach Will control. The tightest-wound bands snap the hardest.

The stag huffs, shaking out its pelt again, and moves its head back and forth like a person trying to crack their neck. Hannibal regards the stag, and makes a note to ask Will is he ever experiences soreness during or after his change. He will have to make sure Will isn’t harming himself with this transformation.

"Why do you think this happened?" Alana whispers, as the stag busies itself with nosing at some of the grass at its feet, and rubbing its shoulders against the bark of the tree it scratched.

Hannibal sighs. "When I touched Will, as he was reading the body, I saw what the victim saw in his final moments," he says. "I saw a grain house, and bright lights. I saw him run to the edge of a cliff, felt the decision he made when he decided to jump." He takes a deep breath, letting it out. "I felt his neck snap."

"That's horrible," Alana says. She lets go of Hannibal's hand and puts it to her own neck.

"He was terribly afraid," Hannibal replies. "But he had also been given a lethal dose of heroin. It may be affecting Will, and might have rendered him unable to think enough to maintain control."

"Have your sessions with him been promising?" Alana asks.

"Yes," Hannibal replies with a nod. He allows himself a small smile, thinking of the night before. "Will is trying very hard to overcome his conditioning. But it's an uphill battle. I

didn't expect perfection to happen overnight."

"This is bad, Hannibal," Alana says. "If Jack finds out that Will can't control himself without the mask and collar, he won't let Will work for the FBI."

"I find myself thinking that perhaps Will isn't suited for the work," he replies mildly. "Or, more accurately, that I don't want him doing it. I think it's damaging, and seeing so much violence…" He sighs. "I want to shield him from it. I want to protect him from the world."

"I feel the same way," Alana says softly. "But is that what Will wants?"

"He wants to be useful," Hannibal replies. "And he believes his only use is working with Jack. I'm at a loss as to how to convince him otherwise."

The stag turns to them, ears pricked forward. It lowers its head and approaches Hannibal and Hannibal reaches out to cups its soft, wet face. The animal's horns touch his shoulders and Hannibal sighs, petting between the stag's eyes.

"Are you in there, darling?" he whispers. "Can you hear me?"

The stag huffs, and touches its muzzle to Hannibal's chest.

"You're safe," Hannibal murmurs, petting the stag's forehead again. "Come back to me."

The stag rears its head up, stepping back, and Hannibal watches its back legs buckle, snapping forward to become knees, the sleek black skin thickening, then turning the normal pale of Will's human skin. The stag tilts its head back, neck snapping, mouth open and teeth retracting to become Will's smaller, sharp canines and human teeth. The horns fall off completely, landing on the ground, and the rest of the stag except for its pelt disappears, covered in Will's human form once again.

Hannibal crouches down, cupping his face, and Will's eyes open. He gasps, his irises finally clearing to show the pretty mesh of blues and greens again, and he looks at Hannibal like he has been blind, and Hannibal is the first thing he's seeing in color.

"I'm sorry," Will says, his mind-voice slamming into Hannibal's consciousness with force, the same way Will is desperately reaching for him and fists his hands in Hannibal's coat. "I'm so sorry. I couldn't -. I didn't -."

"It's alright, Will," Hannibal replies, petting Will's slick hair back from his face. Will shivers, closing his eyes and biting his lower lip. "You were very afraid. I understand."

"I kept seeing the bodies," Will says. "There were…dozens of them. All stitched together, all dead. Their eyes…" He flinches, breathing hard. "I couldn't stop staring at their eyes."

"Did any of them match the missing persons Jack showed you?" Hannibal asks.

Will opens his eyes, gasping, and nods. "I saw one of the women," he replies. "They're all there. There were so many. I can't…I can't stop *seeing* them."

"It's alright," Hannibal whispers. He can feel how scared Will still is, rubbing against his consciousness like a wounded animal. Will whines, bowing his head, and Hannibal pulls him close to his chest and stands, forcing Will to his feet. Will wraps his hands around the pelt to shield his nakedness, shivering. "Alana, would you mind checking if it's safe to get Will back to the car?"

"Of course," Alana says, and leaves. Hannibal lets go of Will just long enough to pick up the antlers, tucking them under his arm. She comes back right away and holds out a hand for Will's other side. "We're good to go. Come on."

They hurry back to the car and Hannibal shields Will as best he can, guiding him into the back seat. He puts the antlers and Will's shoes by his feet and pets through Will's hair again. "I'm taking you home," he says, and Will nods, breathing heavily.

Hannibal gets into the driver's side and Alana gets into the passenger seat. "Let me take you back to the BSU," he tells her.

"No," Alana says sharply. "I'm not leaving him."

Hannibal smiles, starts the car, and pulls out of the parking lot and onto the main road. He drives carefully, not wanting Will to feel the tension and urgency, but if Will needs to change again, the safest place for him to do it would be Hannibal's home.

The drive takes them just over half an hour, and Hannibal guides Will into his home and brings him to the kitchen. Will's pelt drips little blood droplets as he goes, and he sits on the barstool, shivering heavily.

"Get him some water," he tells Alana, knowing she knows where his glasses are, and he goes to Will's room and grabs an oversized sweater from his nest, and a pair of sweatpants. He returns with the clothes and Will takes them with a grateful smile. He stands, dropping the pelt, and pulls the clothes on quickly.

Hannibal brings the pelt out to the patio, washes his hands, and returns to find Will nursing a glass of ice water. Alana has wine, and Hannibal doesn't even mind that she felt the need to open a bottle. He could use a drink himself.

He pours himself a glass and takes a sip, finally allowing some of the tension and anxiety to slip from his shoulders and loosen in his chest. Will is safe. Will is home. That's all he needs to worry about right now.

They three remain, in a long moment of silence, quietly contemplating what just happened. Finally, Alana clears her throat. "You were black, this time," she says, and Will lifts his head. His skin is wet and pink with old blood, drying rapidly. He looks like he just showered in it. He frowns and cocks his head to one side. "The black stag. You said it's triggered by anger or

stress, but you weren't black for Margot." She looks to Hannibal. "Maybe the mood he's in affects the color of the stag."

"An emotional chameleon?" Hannibal says, raising his eyebrows. "It's consistent with Will's other gifts. But Will told me he turned white because that is what Margot expected to see, so that's what he showed her. Perhaps he has more control over how he appears than we first assumed."

"Or maybe both," Alana finishes, looking to Will. Will blinks at them, then sighs, looking down. He shrugs and touches his fingertips to his forehead, then pushes his flat hand out – 'I don't know'.

"I have been given to understand that humans in the possession of inherited and…less black-market mutants, are given a full medical history and behavioral record of their mutants before they sign for their ownership," Hannibal says.

Alana frowns, turning to look at him.

"I believe Bedelia, if she was in fact due to inherit Will from her mother, would have on record a complete list of Will's abilities, behavior, and any special requirements. At least, the ones that would have applied to him pre-Mason Verger."

"And you said you know her," Alana murmurs.

"Yes," Hannibal says with a nod. "I find it an incredible coincidence that she was meant to inherit Will, and instead sold or gave him to the Vergers. I intend to visit her, and at least find out why."

"And you believe she might have Will's records as well?" Alana asks. "Wouldn't Mason have them?"

"It's worth a shot," Hannibal replies with a shrug. "I have also scheduled an MRI for Will today."

"Why?" Alana asks.

"The Vergers told me Will has a tracking chip in him," Hannibal says, somewhat darkly. "I'd like to see if it can be removed."

Alana hums, taking another drink of wine. She winces at the taste – it's not the normal brew Hannibal serves her. "A tracking chip?" she repeats darkly. Hannibal nods. She looks at Will. "Were you a flight risk?"

"I think it's fair to say they assumed Will would try to kill anyone who purchased him," he replies mildly. "Perhaps they believed he would run."

Will huffs, shaking his head. His hands move and Alana smiles. "He asked 'Where would I go?'."

Hannibal smiles, warm in his chest at the words. He takes another drink of wine and sighs. "Will, when you're ready, go shower and get dressed and we will drive Alana back to her car, and then visit Doctor Sutcliffe."

Will nods, finishing his water, and stands, circling the kitchen island. He touches Hannibal's wrist. "Can I kiss you?" he murmurs into Hannibal's mind.

Hannibal smiles, looking at Alana, and then he nods. Will lets out a soft purr, pressing close to Hannibal's chest. He cups Hannibal's jaw and tilts his head up and Hannibal wraps his fingers through Will's hair, pressing their lips together in a chaste, gentle kiss. When Will pulls back, his cheeks are flushed and his eyes shine. He nuzzles Hannibal's jaw and pulls away, then nods to Alana, and leaves the room to go upstairs.

Alana is smiling when Hannibal meets her eyes. "Don't say a word," he says.

"What would I say?" she asks, eyes wide with feigned innocence.

Hannibal hums. "How's Margot?"

"Oh, you Devil!" she says, and slaps him playfully on the arm.

They drop Alana off at her car, and then drive to the hospital at which Doctor Sutcliffe works. Will seems nervous, kneading his fingers against his thighs and biting his lower lip when he looks up at the towering building of the hospital.

He reaches out and takes Hannibal's hand, fingers curling tightly. "I smell sickness," he murmurs.

Hannibal nods, humming. "We will be going straight to the oncology ward," he says. "Do you feel confident in your ability to keep the stag at bay?"

Will swallows harshly, his eyes flashing. He looks at Hannibal and regards him, taking a deep breath, before he clenches his jaw and nods. Hannibal smiles, squeezes his fingers, and gets out of the car. Will follows suit and walks close to Hannibal's side as they enter the hospital. They pass the welcome station and follow the green line to the oncology ward, while Hannibal takes out his cell phone and dials Doctor Sutcliffe's office number.

"Doctor Sutcliffe."

"Hello, Donald," Hannibal replies. "I'm in the building. Are you free?"

"Yes. Meet me in my office," Doctor Sutcliffe says, and Hannibal hands up as he gets in the elevator with Will.

Will shivers when the doors close. He reaches out to touch Hannibal's hand again. "What's the word for the fear of cramped spaces?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles. "Claustrophobia," he murmurs.

Will nods. "I think I might be getting it."

"It's just for a little while," Hannibal says, brushing his thumb over Will's knuckles. Will nods, breathing in deeply through his parted jaws, his eyes on the numbers as they change and then they come to the third floor, and the doors open.

Hannibal leads the way to Doctor Sutcliffe's office and Hannibal knocks on the door. He's greeted by the man, and smiles. Doctor Sutcliffe hasn't changed much at all – still with the thinning hair, the too-kind eyes, the wrinkles in his brow and around his mouth. Doctor Sutcliffe greets him, shaking his hand, and then his eyes drop to Will.

"This the mutant?" he asks.

Hannibal nods. "Will, this is Doctor Sutcliffe," he murmurs.

Will bites his lower lip and holds his hand out to shake. Doctor Sutcliffe hesitates, and then shakes Will's hand quickly. He wipes his hand on his white coat after the fact. "Shall we?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles and steps back, and Doctor Sutcliffe leads the way down the hall towards the MRI room. Will's eyes flash and he steps up to the observation window, pressing his hand against the glass as he stares at the machine.

Will looks back at Hannibal, his brow furrowed and his eyes dark with worry. He lets out a soft, anxious sound, and Hannibal smiles.

"Any metal on him?" Doctor Sutcliffe asks, sliding his key card and opening the door.

Hannibal shakes his head, guiding Will with a hand on his shoulder to step inside. Doctor Sutcliffe pushes a button on the panel at the side of the machine and the bench slides out. "Lay down, Will," Hannibal murmurs, and Will nods, climbing on the bench and straightening out on his back. "This will make a lot of noise, but I promise it won't hurt. I'll be in the next room. If you move, you will ruin the scan, so don't move unless you absolutely need to, alright?"

Will nods, biting his lower lip. Doctor Sutcliffe pushes another button and the bench slides back in, encasing Will within the pod. Will presses his lips together, his fingers flexing before they go lax at his sides.

"Anything in particular you're expecting to find?" Doctor Sutcliffe asks as he and Hannibal go back to the observation room. He fires up the computer program where the images will load and sits down. Hannibal sits next to him as he turns the machine on and it starts to scan.

"Nothing in particular," Hannibal replies.

"I've gotta say, Hannibal," Doctor Sutcliffe murmurs as the first slices of Will's brain come into view. "I really didn't peg you for the mutant-owning type."

"There were special circumstances," Hannibal murmurs. He leans forward as he sees more of Will's brain. It's brightly lit up, showing parts of Will's brain as he lets the machine do its work. The images are clear and sharp. Hannibal isn't sure what he expected to see – he has entertained the idea that Will would have certain physical characteristics that set him apart from normal people, but as Will's brain scans come in, he doesn't see anything too out of the ordinary.

Doctor Sutcliffe, it seems, disagrees. "Should have given him a sedative," he mutters.

Hannibal looks at him, eyebrows raised.

"Look there," Doctor Sutcliffe says, pointing at one of the images. "Every part of his brain is lighting up. Nothing turned off. Your boy's thinking a mile a minute in there."

"Well, this is foreign to him," Hannibal replies mildly. "It's natural to be nervous."

"There's nervous, then there's nuclear," Doctor Sutcliffe replies. "It's a good thing we're not trying to diagnose any brain abnormalities."

Hannibal hums, sitting back. A full MRI takes almost fifteen minutes to complete, and although Hannibal finds Doctor Sutcliffe's general attitude towards Will abrasive, he can be patient. "Have you ever treated a mutant, Donald?" he asks.

He receives a shake of the head for his answer. "I try and stick to actual people," he replies tersely.

Hannibal raises his eyebrows and turns to regard his colleague. "So mutants are not people, to you?" he asks.

Doctor Sutcliffe shakes his head. "It's like doing an MRI on a dog," he replies.

Hannibal hums. "I had assumed you'd be curious," he says. "In the name of science."

"Well, if you bring him back with cancer, maybe I'll be interested," he replies. Then, he looks at the screen, frowning, and sits forward. "What is that?"

Hannibal turns his attention to Will's scan. The scans have reached his stomach now, and Hannibal frowns when he sees, sitting just shy of Will's stomach, a single, dark, angular mark. Doctor Sutcliffe takes the frame and enlarges it on a second computer, rolling over to it. "Looks like there's something there," he says.

"Organic?" Hannibal replies.

"No…" He enhances and enlarges the image further. "Looks almost like a…chip of some sort," he says, squinting through his glasses. "Did you put a tracking device in him?"

"No," Hannibal says. "Though his previous owner told me he was chipped."

"Strange place to put it," Doctor Sutcliffe murmurs. He prints out the scan and takes it, holding it up to the backlit board at the side of the computers on the wall. "This thing is

embedded deep, too. Near his pancreas. It would have been very difficult to place."

"And impossible to remove," Hannibal says quietly, noting the placement. There's a reason pancreatic surgery is never done.

Doctor Sutcliffe hums. Then, he looks at Hannibal like he's just sensed a joke and wants to hear the punchline. "Not impossible," he says after a quiet moment. "But I don't think it'll be something that can be done with standard surgery. You'd have to cut him deep at the stomach, and he likely wouldn't survive."

Hannibal sighs. "Thank you, Donald," he says, standing. "That's all I needed to know."

"You just wanted to know where the chip was?" Doctor Sutcliffe asks, surprised, as Hannibal terminates the scan and presses the button that will slide the bench out, so Will can leave.

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "Please delete the scans from record."

He nods, and Hannibal opens the door and goes to Will as Will sits up, blinking blearily. He shakes his head and rubs his hands over his eyes, pressing his lips together. "Are you alright?"

Will nods, opening his eyes and reaching out to touch Hannibal's wrist. "The noise hurt my head," he says.

"I'm sorry," Hannibal replies, helping Will to his feet. "But we can leave now. I learned everything I needed to know."

He guides Will out of the room and into the hallway, and Doctor Sutcliffe closes and locks the door behind them. "Thank you again, Donald," he says. "I owe you."

"No problem," Doctor Sutcliffe replies, his eyes sharp on Will's face. "Have a good day."

Hannibal nods and leads Will out of the hospital. Once they're outside, Will takes a deep breath like he had been holding it until he got into the fresh air. "I didn't like that," Will says, touching Hannibal's wrist as they go to his car, so Hannibal can hear his mind-voice.

"I'm sorry," Hannibal replies. "But I learned where the chip is."

"Yes?"

"It appears to have been embedded in your pancreas, or very near it," Hannibal adds, huffing a frustrated breath. "It's not a location one would undergo surgery on…lightly."

Will huffs, as dismayed as Hannibal felt. "So, you can't remove it."

"Not without a lot of care."

"I can heal," Will says. "You could gut me right now and I'd survive."

Hannibal looks at him, and sighs, cupping Will's face. "We'll figure something out," he murmurs. "After we deal with Mason Verger, the chip becomes irrelevant. We will focus all of our energies on him, now."

Will smiles. "And that woman," he adds. "The one who was meant to own me."

Hannibal nods. "Yes," he replies. "And Bedelia."

Chapter 17

"I must warn you, Will, that she will likely not be alone."

Will gives a curious chirp, frowning at Hannibal as Hannibal parks his car in front of Bedelia's home. He has an appointment scheduled with her today, due to start in fifteen minutes, which gives him some time to tell Will about what he may find inside.

Will cocks his head to one side.

"Bedelia owns a mutant already," Hannibal says. "It is likely one of the reasons she surrendered your care. He is there for her protection. If she reacts negatively to you, he might be compelled to defend his mistress from a perceived threat."

Will hums, curling his fingers around Hannibal's wrist. "I mean her no harm," he says, whisper-quiet into Hannibal's mind.

Hannibal smiles. "Are you quite sure?"

Will's eyes flash, and his lips twitch at the corners. He sighs, looking forward, through the windshield towards her front door. "I'm not sure what I'm feeling at the moment." Hannibal hums. "I suppose it would depend on what she says."

"I want you to be able to know as much about your past as we can," Hannibal says. "But people have a saying - 'Ignorance is bliss'."

"Do you think I'm better off not knowing?" Will murmurs, turning his head to meet Hannibal's eyes. His eyes are sharp, all-seeing. "Or is it simply because she's your friend that you're telling me to turn back?"

"I'm not telling you to do anything, one way or another," Hannibal says. "I'm merely saying, if it turns out she didn't want you, and that she willingly sold you to the Vergers, knowing what kind of monster Mason Verger is, it is up to you how you respond with that information."

Will huffs. "Do people always have so many secrets?" he asks.

"Everyone has secrets, Will," Hannibal replies.

Will hums, smiling, and nods towards the door. "Shall we?"

Hannibal nods, letting go of Will's hand so they can both get out of the car. Will draws himself to Hannibal's side, one step behind at his shoulder as they cross the street and walk up the step to Bedelia's front door.

Hannibal knocks, and waits as he hears her heels coming towards the door on the other side.

She opens it, smiling in welcome. Then, her eyes meet Will's, and all the color drains from her face. Her expression changes from the warm smile to one of fear. "You," she gasps, and covers her mouth like she didn't mean to let it slip.

"I take it you've met before," Hannibal says lightly.

Bedelia swallows, her eyes flashing to Hannibal. "What is the meaning of this?" she demands.

"I wanted to bring Will to our session today," Hannibal replies.

Bedelia's eyes go back to Will, shadowed and worried, before she swallows and gives a short nod of acceptance. "So, this is your mutant." Hannibal smiles and nods. "Please come in," she says, and steps back to allow Hannibal and Will to enter. Anthony is standing at the entryway to her office, silent and still as he always is. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Please," Hannibal says. He walks into the office and takes a seat and Will plants himself at Hannibal's feet, cross-legged on the floor. Anthony mirrors him, sitting by Bedelia's empty chair.

"I must admit, Hannibal, I'm surprised," she says airily, carrying in a tray with three glasses of wine. She offers one to Hannibal, the second to Will, and takes her third, handing the tray to Anthony before she takes her seat. Anthony settles the tray on his lap, holding it loosely, his eyes on Will. Hannibal calculates the distance between them, knowing it would take less than a moment for Anthony to use the tray as a weapon.

"You can't be that surprised," Hannibal says lightly, folding one leg over the other. Will leans against his shin, one hand curling around his ankle above his sock so their skin is touching, and Will can speak to him if he needs to. "You must have known it was possible that Will would come into my care. After all, you're the one who sent us both to the Vergers."

"I haven't seen him for many years," Bedelia says, her eyes on Will's face. Will meets her gaze steadily. "He was just a boy when last we met."

Will blinks, shifting his weight. Hannibal's eyes fall to him, watching as Will's head turns, searching the bookshelf at their side, glancing at the fireplace. Bedelia does not keep any personal effects in her home office, by design.

"I remember her scent," Will murmurs, brushing his thumb down Hannibal's calf. "She wears her mother's scent."

Hannibal smiles. "You mustn't fret, Bedelia," he says quietly. "I have not come to harm you. Nor has Will."

"What is it you want, then?"

"Information," Hannibal replies. "If you were to receive Will into your care, you would have inherited his medical records."

"The Vergers have those, now."

Hannibal sighs, lifting the wine glass to his lips. "I figured."

Will lets out a low, warning sound, his fingers tightening on Hannibal's leg. "Don't drink the wine," he says. Hannibal pauses, looking at him, and Will sniffs his own glass, his nose wrinkling. Hannibal hums, taking Will's glass from him, and sets them both on the table by Will's shoulder.

Bedelia swallows, drumming her nails against her glass. "I have long considered us friends, Bedelia," Hannibal says quietly, sitting back in his chair. He can smell something sharp in the air – it's like fear, souring the scent of her perfume. "You have always been there for me, when I had few others I could rely on."

"I'm glad to hear it," Bedelia says quietly.

"But now, I'm beginning to think some grander scheme is at play." Bedelia blinks at him, swallowing again. Her free hand falls to Anthony's hair, petting through it anxiously. "It is a remarkable coincidence, that the FBI was given information for a mutant that you were supposed to keep and care for. How do you think that could have happened?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Bedelia murmurs.

"I think that Mason Verger is collecting mutants with very specific gifts and mindsets," Hannibal says. "Ones that would be of great use to the less savory people of the world." She hums, tilting her head to one side.

"Do you count yourself amongst those less savory people?" she says coolly.

"Did you think Will was one?" Hannibal counters. Bedelia swallows and sits back in her chair as Hannibal leans forward, his elbows on his knees. "Mason Verger tortured him," he says. "He slit his throat and rendered him irreparably damaged. Did you know this would happen?"

"You're so sure he was innocent to begin with?" Bedelia says coldly, a flash of wrath crossing her face as she looks at Will.

Hannibal frowns, tilting his head to one side.

"My mother cared for that *thing*," Bedelia says, taking a sip of her wine. "She loved him like a son."

Hannibal smiles. "Jealousy isn't a good color on you, Bedelia."

"It's not jealousy," Bedelia murmurs. "I see what things like him are with a clear conscience. It is you, I fear, who have been blinded by your regard for him. Just as my mother was."

"What do you mean?"

"My mother was gutted, Hannibal," Bedelia says. "Her death was not of natural causes. And when she died, where was your dear, beloved Will? Nowhere to be found. I will not let the same thing happen to me."

Hannibal blinks, sitting back. He looks down at Will and Will has his eyes on Anthony, calculating and cold. He doesn't say anything. "Will would never harm me," he says.

Bedelia hums. "Don't be so sure," she says, taking another drink of wine. The anxiety has faded now, Hannibal can see that she is pleased, to make him doubt. Is it the regard of a friend, or something more sinister than that? "I bought Anthony when I moved away from home, but it wasn't for the protection from men like you." She nods to Will. "Rather, from the creatures men like you draw to them."

"So you admit your hand has played a part here," Hannibal says, his eyes sharp on her face. Looking for any tell, any twitch to give her away. "Your relationship with the Vergers is more intimate than you allowed me to think. You have been dishonest with me."

"I am your therapist, Hannibal," Bedelia says coolly. "I only seek what is best for you."

"What is 'best' for me, or what is best for everyone else?" Hannibal replies. "You have always spoken against Will. Now that you know who he is, I sense fear in you. I can only come to the conclusion that you're more afraid of what he'll tell me than what he'll do to me."

"When he has no master, who do you think his next target will be?"

"Will has no memory of his life before the Vergers," Hannibal says.

Bedelia huffs, taking another drink of her wine. "So he claims."

"I believe him," Hannibal says.

"More than you believe me?"

Hannibal stifles a low growl and pushes himself to his feet. Anthony's eyes flash and he rises, holding the tray in one hand as though ready to strike. Will snarls, his eyes darkening, and he stands, putting himself between Hannibal and Anthony.

Hannibal pauses, waiting to see if Anthony will strike. Will is trembling next to him, his face a mask of anger, his sharp teeth bared at the other mutant. "Will," Hannibal murmurs, and reaches out to flatten his hand on Will's arm.

Will lets out another soft hiss, like a warning, but allows Hannibal to pull him back. "I think I have all the answers I need," Hannibal says coolly. Bedelia's eyes are wide, her cheeks pale with fear and her knuckles white on her glass. "We'll see ourselves out."

"Be careful, Hannibal," Bedelia murmurs as Anthony takes a step back. "I'd hate to see you meet my mother's fate."

Hannibal presses his lips together, and nods for Will to go outside. He follows, closing the door behind him, and walks slowly back to his car.

Will meets his eyes, dark with worry. He reaches out to take Hannibal's hand and Hannibal pulls his back, not allowing the touch. "No," he murmurs, shaking his head. "I must be alone with my thoughts, right now."

Will lets out a soft, quiet whimper, but he gets in the car as Hannibal does. Hannibal catches Will's eyes on the front window, dark and angry.

"If anything happens to her, that will reflect troublingly on your character," he warns.

Will nods, closing his eyes, and curls up in his seat. Hannibal starts the car and drives away, contemplative and quiet, his thoughts a whirl. Of course, the fate of Bedelia's mother is one that can be easily fact-checked. If the woman did die from a violent attack, it would be damning evidence against Will.

But he cannot rationalize that creature with the one he knows. Will's loyalty to him is unfailing, it must be – Hannibal can sense Will's thoughts, feel him whenever Will is touching him against his mind. Nothing like that could be faked, surely? If Will does intend to do Hannibal harm, he is either the greatest actor the world has ever known…or Bedelia is lying.

And she admitted to lying about knowing about Will and the Vergers. She admitted to being false when it came to her hand in the whole thing. For all Hannibal knows, she might have been the one to leak the information of Lot 166 to the FBI, knowing that she would recommend Hannibal for Will's care and control. And Mason had been so sure that Will would try to harm his next owner – perhaps Bedelia saw a chance at doing away with Hannibal's darkness.

Perhaps she had overseen Will's torture, as well, knowing that when he was bought he would be too feral and dark to be controlled.

Mason Verger is trying to create a ring of evil men and their mutants, of that Hannibal now has no doubt. But soldiers and Kings need counsel, they need courtiers, they need someone to sit back while the armies fight their battles. If Mason is the King, Bedelia is the Bishop, never attacking directly but watching from the King's side, waiting for the moment to strike.

There is one way to assure Will's loyalty. "We will need to strike soon," he says, and Will lifts his head like a dog hearing its master come home, wide-eyed and eager to hear what Hannibal has to say. "If Bedelia is as close to Mason Verger as I fear, then she will tell him right away what has happened. Mason will be ready for us."

Will nods, his fingers twitching like he wants to reach out again, but is afraid of being rejected.

Hannibal sighs, driving to his home and parking his car, turning off the engine. "Will," Hannibal says, and turns to regard him. Will straightens in his seat and turns towards him, his hands curled up like he wants to protect his heart.

Hannibal manages a tight smile, and shakes his head, getting out of the car and going inside. He hears Will rushing to follow, and lets them both in, closing and locking the door behind them.

Hannibal turns, cupping Will's face, and Will gasps, going lax in his hold. "Come outside with me," Hannibal murmurs, kissing Will's forehead, and Will nods, following when

Hannibal lets him go and leads the way outside.

Hannibal sighs, taking out the whistle from his pocket. Will's eyes flash when he sees it and he bites his lower lip, meeting Hannibal's gaze with equal parts worry and question. Hannibal mustn't hesitate, but he finds himself wanting to. If Will is innocent, if Hannibal allows himself to doubt Will's loyalty, what happens next may break that.

"Get on your knees," Hannibal says, and Will bites his lower lip and obeys, his face raised to Hannibal like a servant begging for their master's mercy. Hannibal doesn't go to him, though he desperately wants to.

He holds his hand out and Will takes it, squeezing tightly. "When we first met, you tried to attack me," Hannibal says, and Will nods, looking ashamed. "Why?"

Will whimpers. "Doctor Lecter -."

"Answer the question, Will."

Will flinches. "I was afraid," he says. "I thought you might hurt me."

Hannibal sighs. "I don't believe you," he murmurs, and blows harshly through the whistle.

Will gasps, putting his free hand over his ear, hissing in pain. He looks up, his eyes black and his teeth bared. "I swear!" he says, his voice frantic and shaking. "I swear, I was -."

"Answer me honestly, Will," Hannibal says, speaking into Will's mind so that his mouth is free.

Will growls, trying to pull his hand away, but Hannibal doesn't let him go. Will whimpers, and Hannibal closes his eyes, finding himself back in his study as he had been the first time Will entered his mind. He looks around – the fire in the hearth is blazing brightly, angry and red. The books on the shelf have been tossed and scattered around. The stag is at the window, the curtains and carpeting shredded from its sharp horn and hooves.

Will comes into view, pacing in front of the fire. He whirls on Hannibal and snarls at him. "Why are you doing this to me?" he demands. "Are you so quick to let her cause doubt?"

"I have to be sure," Hannibal replies coldly, blowing through the whistle again. The Will in his head cries out, fisting his hair, his eyes turning black. The stag roars, baring its fangs and pawing at the ground harsh enough to tear through the carpeting. "Why did you attack me, Will?"

"Because I –. Because -." Will goes silent, snarling, and Hannibal blows through the whistle again. He can hear it, entrenched as he is in Will's mind, but it does not manifest as sound so much as color, and light. Whenever he blows through it, the fire rages, bright and burning like it intends to consume the room.

Will falls to his knees, whimpering in pain.

"Tell me, Will," Hannibal says, his chest tight and cold. It feels like it did when he first realized that Mischa was dead, sitting in his belly. The betrayal hurts sharply, but he will not exact revenge until he has proof. A confession. "I demand to know."

"Because I had to!" Will cries. Hannibal pauses, lowering the whistle from his lips. He blinks, and the study is gone. Will is trembling on his knees, and when he lifts his head, his face is wet with tears, his eyes shining and red-rimmed. "I didn't want to, I swear. My master made me."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, crouching down. He drops the whistle and cups Will's face in both hands and Will sobs, closing his eyes and bowing his head.

"I swear," he says, his mind-voice floating into Hannibal's. "When you bought me, my master came to me and told me I had to kill you. But then I met you, and I saw you, and I knew I couldn't. Margot is my friend, and she told me I didn't have to do what Mason asked of me. That you and I could be friends."

"You'll forgive me if I don't believe you, Will," Hannibal says quietly, rendered numb by Will's confession.

"But you were kind to me," Will whispers, lifting his eyes. "Why would I betray that?"

"Why indeed?" Hannibal asks.

Will bites his lower lip, cupping Hannibal's cheek. He leans forward, resting their foreheads together, and Hannibal sucks in a shaky breath, feeling the red and gold of Will's love wrapping around his mind and sitting behind his eyes. "You told me we decided how we handled the information and answers given to us," he murmurs, and Hannibal nods, swallowing harshly. "Now we both know – I might have killed my old master, and I'm plotting with you to kill my second one. I understand, my track record is far from optimal, but you have something they didn't."

"And what is that?"

Will swallows. "My love," he replies. "My loyalty. I would not give that to a woman who treated me like a pet, nor to a man who tortured and enslaved me. I give it to you – someone who looks at me like an equal, who gives me purpose and direction in my life. That is what you have given me." He brushes his thumb over Hannibal's cheekbone and Hannibal meets his dark eyes. "You promised you wouldn't send me away."

"I did," Hannibal replies hoarsely.

Will manages a weak smile.

"Why does Mason Verger want me dead?"

"Why would Bedelia want you dead?" Will replies.

Hannibal huffs a breath, petting through Will's sweaty hair. "I have been very cruel to you," he says. Will swallows, ducking his gaze, his forehead pressed tight to Hannibal's. "I'm sorry,

darling. Do you forgive me?"

"You did what you thought had to be done," Will replies solemnly, soft with forgiveness.

"When we kill Mason Verger, my mind will be put at rest," Hannibal says.

Will shivers, pulling back to meet Hannibal's eyes. He nods. "I will prove myself to you," he vows, taking one of Hannibal's hands and kissing his palm. His tears are drying, his eyes shining like sunlight on the ocean.

Hannibal smiles, and cups Will's neck, pulling him into a kiss. He pushes himself to his feet and pulls Will upright and Will sags against him. "Come inside," he says, and Will nods, breathing heavily. Hannibal leads him back in, the whistle left forgotten on the patio floor.

Chapter 18

Hannibal rests with Will, Will's arm thrown over his chest, idly toying with the edge of his shirt sleeve, his cheek resting on Hannibal's shoulder. His thoughts are calm, the haze of Will's presence in his mind is lovely and warm despite the ugliness Hannibal had forced him through earlier that day.

After forcing Will's confession, Hannibal had fed him heartily, and Will had devoured every bite of food placed before him, until his eyelids grew heavy with exhaustion. Now, Hannibal feels calm and secure in his decision; Will loves him, Hannibal does not doubt that. How can he, when he can feel the evidence for it in Will's very soul?

"What was in the wine?" he murmurs, looking at the ceiling.

Will lets out a quiet sound, half-asleep and lax like a languishing wildcat. He presses closer to Hannibal's side and Hannibal curls his hand around Will's shoulders, and one of Will's legs lifts to wrap around Hannibal's thigh, settling more of his weight. "I'm not sure," his mind-voice replies. "But it smelled sweet like the food I ate in my old master's home."

Hannibal presses his lips together. "Cyanide has a sweet smell," he says. "Like Amaretto."

Will huffs a laugh. "I don't know what that is," he says.

"It smells like almonds," Hannibal replies, smiling. He cups Will's hand and brings it to his lips, kissing his knuckles. Will purrs in answer, nuzzling Hannibal's shoulder. "We need a plan for getting to the Vergers."

Will nods, rubbing his nose against the neckline of Hannibal's shirt. "The auction would be easiest."

"They'd never allow you inside," Hannibal says, settling Will's hand on his chest.

"What if you were to hide me in your car?" Will asks. "I could sneak out once you were inside and find my way from there."

"You will have to learn to communicate with me without touch, if we were to accomplish such a thing." Will huffs, a flicker of solemn understanding etched in pale blue between his consciousness and Hannibal's. "Do you think you would be able to manage by the next auction?"

"I don't know," Will replies honestly, his mental presence turning yellow with worry. He lifts his head so that he can meet Hannibal's eyes. His brow is furrowed, his mouth turned down in displeasure. "I've been trying, I swear I have, but it's difficult."

"I know, darling," Hannibal says, letting go of Will's hand so he can cup Will's face. Will's eyes close and his expression smooths out, he turns and nuzzles Hannibal's palm, kissing the meat of his thumb. "I wish I knew how to help you."

Will sighs, before his eyes open, a flash of eagerness passing over his face. "Here," he says, and pushes himself to his knees. Hannibal straightens, so he's sitting upright, and Will takes both of his hands and places them on his own face. "Take me back to that place. The one you showed me."

Hannibal nods, closing his eyes. He envisions the Palermo Cathedral, finds the focus in his mind shifted so that he is sitting on the steps just beyond the image of the grinning skull. Will is kneeling at his feet, his face in Hannibal's hands.

Will opens his eyes, wide and a lovely blue, and he smiles. He places his hands over Hannibal's, and slowly pulls the first away. He pushes himself to his feet and shakes his head when Hannibal makes to rise.

"Stay," he murmurs, gently brushing his fingers under Hannibal's chin. He bites his lower lip, heaves a deep breath, and then takes Hannibal's other hand away so that Hannibal is not touching him in this mental place.

He takes one step back, and then another, until he is standing above Death's smile. He turns, looking around at the golden angels and high arches made of white stone. Hannibal's fingers curl, unable to feel Will's warmth under his hands anymore.

"I think," Will says quietly, "if I were to come to this place before, and keep a part of you here with me, I would be able to speak to you."

Hannibal opens his eyes, blinking when he returns to his bedroom. He is not touching Will skin to skin at any point, but he can still feel Will's presence in his head. It's soft, muted like looking at colors through sunglasses, but it's there.

"Will?" he asks silently, pushing the name across their bond.

Will blinks and smiles at him. "Hello, Doctor Lecter," he purrs, his fingers curling in his lap. Hannibal can feel his excitement; his proud joy over having accomplished this next step. "We are in another fort."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side. "Do you think you can maintain this connection long enough to see yourself inside the Verger estate?"

Will presses his lips together, and nods. Hannibal can feel a flicker of hesitation, followed immediately by determination, the color of tempered steel. "Yes," Will replies. "I close my eyes and see Palermo, and I see you there. As long as I don't break concentration, I think I can maintain it."

"I would have you practice," Hannibal says. "We must be certain before we are to move forward."

Will nods, his jaw tightening, a determined look on his face. Then, he bites his lower lip, and sighs. "I will miss touching you," he says.

Hannibal smiles. "There is no reason to ration that, right now," he replies.

Will's smile is wide and relieved. He lunges for Hannibal, a rough laugh stuck in his throat when he puts his hands on Hannibal's face again and kisses him deeply. Will's affection slams into him as eagerly as the man himself, covering Hannibal's mind in a blanket of red and gold.

Hannibal growls, taking hold of Will by the waist and rolling him onto his back. Will gasps against his mouth, spreading his legs around Hannibal's hips to allow him room to fall between them. Hannibal fists a tight hand in Will's hair, tugging their mouths apart, and Will lets out a plaintive sound, stuck deep in his chest, his eyes wide and adoring on Hannibal's face.

Hannibal puts his other hand on Will's neck, delighted when Will swallows and bares his throat for Hannibal to kiss. "Do you love me, Will?" he whispers against Will's pink skin, warmed by the heat in his room. Will nods, his hands flattening on Hannibal's sides, bearing his weight eagerly. "Show me. I want to feel it."

Will trembles underneath him, and Hannibal closes his eyes as the warmth of Will's presence grows spines, flexing like a cat's claws when it's about to pounce. It curls around his head like amber around a fly, covering him so completely that Hannibal is certain that if anything were to be his undoing, it would be this; not knowing at what point Will's consciousness ends and his begins. He thinks Will could so easily rip him to shreds like this, consume him like a piece of meat, and Hannibal would be none the wiser.

But Will's love is gentle. It laps at Hannibal's mind like waves on the shore, eagerly seeking to gain more ground but constantly tugged away by Will's affection for him, his desire to see Hannibal victorious. Hannibal growls, pulling his hand away from Will's neck to set his teeth there instead, and Will's breath catches, his stomach tenses up, and his claws dig into Hannibal's lower back as he lifts his hips, seeking friction and heat.

"You're beautiful," Hannibal says, forcing the words into the tumultuous storm of Will's head so that he can keep his mouth free, he parts his jaws and sucks a blooming kiss to Will's neck. Will growls, low in his chest, his thighs trembling before they tighten around Hannibal's hips. "I will make sure Mason Verger feels every slight he committed against you. Every blow, every torture, every inch of pain will not go unanswered."

"Please," Will begs, his voice a jarring shot of gold amidst the rest of his presence. His hands slide under Hannibal's shirt, seeking more bare skin to touch, and run up, taking the garment with him. Hannibal growls, rearing back and hauling the offending shirt over his head, throwing it to one side.

Will gazes up at him as humanity would have observed the Genesis God, the deep red bruise on his neck striking and raw. He touches Hannibal's chest, curls his claws in the thatch of hair covering Hannibal's heart, and rears up to kiss him again. Hannibal cups his nape, squeezing tightly, and answers in kind, desperate to draw Will ever closer.

Will reaches for his own clothes, eagerness present in every touch, every rough gasp against Hannibal's mouth, every spine and shard of color he sparks behind Hannibal's eyes. Hannibal only parts from him long enough for Will to pull his shirt over his head, and then he presses

Will down onto the bed again, his hand finding the place just below the scar on Will's throat and squeezing gently.

"You don't have to," Hannibal says, because he feels like he must. "Your loyalty to me is beyond doubt."

Will bares his teeth, his hands finding Hannibal's bared flanks and digging in, sharp enough to sting. "I have free will, don't I?" he demands, and Hannibal smiles, nodding. "This is what I choose to do with it. I want it."

Hannibal nods, and kisses Will again, sure that Will can feel in his own mind Hannibal's emotions. Hannibal does not seek to hide them; he opens himself for Will completely, allows Will to walk through the hallways of his memories, soak in the love and affection Hannibal has held for everyone who has touched him enough to earn it. His laughter fills Hannibal's head when he finds memories of Alana, he purrs when he sees every one of Hannibal's kills, and shivers with awe when he hears the music that has swayed Hannibal to tears.

And he shows Hannibal in kind; Hannibal growls when he feels the hot lashes of a whip against his back, grows fond when a flicker of Margot flashes over his eyes, sees glimpses of Will as he learned sign language with the sisters, feels the relief that Will felt when he first saw Hannibal – the dark-horned man with golden eyes who had gazed back at him and found him much alike.

It's what Alana promised would happen, spoken into existence; this is the deepest intimacy and knowledge Hannibal has ever encountered. If he lived for a thousand years, he would never know someone as intricately as he knows Will, nor could anyone possibly know him.

He could linger for days inside of Will like this, but Will's thoughts flicker, pulling him back like a tide, an urgency born of something much more physical. "Please," Will begs against his lips, his eyes shining when Hannibal pulls back to look at him. "I want this."

And Hannibal can feel how much. "I know," he replies, his voice surprisingly hoarse. He kisses Will's forehead and pushes himself to his knees. "Get undressed."

Will nods, obeying hurriedly, and Hannibal reaches into his bedside table to take out the small bottle of lubricant he uses when his body demands it. He opens the bottle and pours some onto his fingers, before setting it back down and returning to Will.

The sight of Will bare for him is not foreign, he has bathed Will enough times and seen him transform enough to know the color of his pale thighs, the small patch of hair above his cock, a trail of it running to his navel. He knows the strength of the muscle here, knows the feeling of Will's erection between his fingers, but it hits him harshly all the same.

"Have you ever been touched like this?" Hannibal asks, smoothing one hand down Will's inner thigh and forcing him to spread his legs more.

Will bites his lower lip and shakes his head. "Not that I remember," he replies.

Hannibal smiles. He's sure with their mental connection so strong, he will sense if Will feels any discomfort. He leans down, kissing Will gently, and Will shivers, sliding his fingers to cup the back of Hannibal's head, and lifts his hips eagerly to meet the first of Hannibal's fingers as he presses one slick fingertip to his hole.

He pushes in and Will tenses, whining gently, but Hannibal feels in him no hesitation, no desire for respite. He forces his finger in all the way, growling at the tight, selfish clench of Will's body around him. Will's thigh trembles under his hand and he starts to sweat, blisteringly hot. Hannibal kisses his way down Will's jaw, to his tender, exposed neck, and sucks another bruise just shy of the first. By the time he's done, he will pepper Will's body with his marks, erasing all of Mason Verger's stain from him, and he will measure how fast they heal.

Will moans, the sound more of a vibration against Hannibal's lips than any real noise, and Hannibal answers in kind, digging his hand into Will's thigh as he forces another finger inside. Will gasps, stomach tensing, when Hannibal curls his fingers and presses deep, hoping to find that sensitive spot inside of a man that will make Will's pleasure tight and urgent in their heads.

"Please," Will growls, the word spearing Hannibal's mind. Hannibal shivers at the rawness of it. "Please, Hannibal."

Hannibal gasps, his spine turning hot and sharp at the sound of his name, whispered so desperately into his head. He hadn't realized how much he needed to hear it until it was spoken. He pulls his fingers out and shoves his lounge pants down to below his knees, spreading the remaining lubricant on his cock. Will's pleasure has driven him over the edge once before, and he is determined to bring Will to that point again.

Will meets his eyes, the pupils wide enough to swallow almost the entire iris, his breathing heavy and making his blushing chest stutter with need. He reaches out and touches Hannibal's chest, bites his lower lip, and lets out another plaintive whine.

"Please." His mental presence is a hard ball of static, waiting on the cliff edge for Hannibal to fall into. How could he ever resist such a call?

Hannibal takes Will's wrists and forces them to the bed on either side of his head. He kisses Will deeply, releases one arm, and takes his cock in hand, pressing the head to Will's hole. Will shudders, lifting his hips, and Hannibal snarls as Will's body parts for him, allowing him inside.

He pushes in until he can go no deeper, pierce Will no more permanently. Will's pleasured moan fills his head, the static ball exploding at Hannibal's touch, and Hannibal returns his hand to Will's bare wrist, clenching tightly, and he forces his thighs tight to the underside of Will's, making him spread more, and starts to move.

Will's kiss is lightning, striking Hannibal behind the eyes with every thrust. The slick of his sweat spurs Hannibal onward, like a dog chasing down a fox, intent on the kill. He wants to destroy Will with his love, crumble them both to dust and shards of glass so that they might

be remade and forged in fire, create a work of art to rival the stained glass and mosaic legacy of Pompeii.

Hannibal bares his teeth, bites Will's lower lip hard enough to draw blood. The spike of pain mixes in a hue of red and gold, churning together into the finest shade. He licks the blood from Will's lip, smears it along his fangs, kisses and consumes Will and allowing Will's mind to devour him in turn.

He knows when he's found Will's prostate. Will seizes up underneath him, gasping and breaking the kiss to bare his throat for Hannibal's mouth. Will's arms tense, wanting to rise, to touch in return, and Hannibal allows it, breaking his grip to instead cup Will's ass, lifting him into every thrust.

Will's claws rake down Hannibal's back, his sweat making them sting, and Hannibal growls and bites Will's neck in answer. It's a deliberate crash, the push-pull of a rockslide and tectonic plates. Hannibal would have the ground shake under Will's love if he could.

Flashes of words spring to him along with the feelings. Demands to fuck harder, to grab tighter, to bite more roughly. Hannibal obeys every one like each order is a tug on his own soul – Will answers his desires and magnifies them, and Hannibal knows he can be as brutal as he desires with this vibrant, beautiful creature below him.

"Hannibal," Will gasps, his name a clarion call amidst the cacophony.

Hannibal growls, clenching his eyes tightly shut, able to feel Will's pleasure like his own, climbing up his spine, sinking low in his gut. "Show me," he commands. "I want to feel how much you love me."

Will's breath catches, his lungs seize, and Hannibal feels the rope around his neck tighten. He takes Will's hair in his hand and kisses Will passionately as Will goes still, tensing up and spilling between their stomachs in another wave of heat that Hannibal feels both physically and in Will's mind. Will's hands abruptly turn gentle on him, he's shaking like a man who has just sprinted a marathon, and Hannibal cannot hold himself back any longer.

He slams deep into Will, his hands tightening as he spills into Will's spasming body. Will's satisfaction washes over him, the tide finally coming in and pulling Hannibal under, into the deepest and darkest currents of Will's love and adoration.

He's trembling when he's done, breathing just as heavily as Will, affected too deeply to maintain decorum. Will is purring, licking the sweat from Hannibal's neck, nuzzling his shoulder as his hands smooth up the lines he left on Hannibal's back.

"Thank you," Will whispers, the red and gold less urgent but no less vibrant. Softer, like the glow of a setting sun. Will's eyes are glazed, his face lax, and Hannibal loosens his hold in Will's hair and pulls him up by the nape of his neck into a deep, long kiss that robs them both of whatever breath they had regained.

"You delight me, darling," he replies, unwilling to spare the space to say the words out loud, but pressing them into Will's head instead. Will's purr gets louder, rumbling in his chest, and

he relaxes against the bed as Hannibal pulls out, straightens his lounge pants, and settles into place at Will's side.

Will turns into him, uncaring for the sweat and seed staining their skin. He nuzzles Hannibal's neck and licks over his pulse, humming softly, as satisfied as a well-fed predator. His eyelids are heavy, exhaustion tugging at him that Hannibal feels in kind.

He pets a hand through Will's hair, kisses his forehead, then his sweet mouth. "I love you," Will says, soft and joyous.

Hannibal smiles, resting their foreheads together. "I had never imagined, in all my years, that I could ever receive such a gift," he replies, speaking out loud, for it feels more real to say the words and let the bed, the air, hear them. Will shivers, pressing closer, and steals another kiss. "After Mason Verger is dealt with, I would never have you from my side."

Will smiles, closing his eyes, his nose brushing against Hannibal's. "Nor would I," he replies, and opens his eyes again. "This weekend, then?"

Hannibal huffs a laugh, and kisses Will's forehead, pulling him into a gentle embrace. "Yes," he says. "We shall attend the auction this Saturday, and bring a reckoning."

Hannibal isn't worried – worry would be the result of doubt, of indecision. He is suffering from neither. But he is concerned. If Will cannot maintain their psychic connection, Hannibal will not know if he's safe, where he is. If he's even still alive, or brought down by one of Mason Verger's mutants, or one of the sisters.

He opens the trunk of his car, knowing that Will is going to have to remain inside it until he is within the Verger estate. "There's a release here," he says, pointing to the little yellow lever on the inside. "When the car is parked, you can use it to get out."

Will nods, smiling. He turns to Hannibal and catches him for a kiss. "Don't worry," he says, touching Hannibal's face. "It's only death-defying odds, and I do not think either of us will meet him tonight."

Hannibal smiles. "You are sure about this?" he asks, cupping Will's face. He blinks, and finds himself in the Palermo, Will standing in front of him just as he is now, so that he can cement and maintain their connection while they are apart.

"I would see Mason Verger die," Will says quietly. "Any consequence is one I'm willing to bear."

"You are a delightful creature," Hannibal breathes.

Will's smile widens. "I only ask that you do not harm Margot," he says. "Her son will be born soon. He needs a mother."

"He shall have one," Hannibal replies. "I do not wish her any harm."

"Good," Will says. Hannibal blinks back to the physical world, and Will pulls away from him, climbing into the trunk of the car. It's a modest space and he curls up in it tightly, and Hannibal reaches in to cup his face one more time. He can feel Will's presence at the edge of his mind when he does it, and smiles, fighting back the urge to question Will once more.

Will meets his eyes, and cups his hand, pressing a kiss to Hannibal's palm. "I owe you everything," he says. "My freedom, my life, and my heart. I won't fail you."

Hannibal smiles, and pulls back, glad when he can still feel Will prowling around the edges of his mind. He shuts the trunk of his car and circles to the driver's seat, getting in and starting towards the Verger estate.

Tonight, Mason Verger dies. Let the rest of the pieces fall where they may.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Yoooo this chapter is SUPER violent. Fair warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal is not the sort of person to do anything in half measures. In his past, he has always strived for perfection and control in all things. Purchasing Will had been a blip on that particular radar, a current of air on the ocean that has since gained speed and temper until it becomes a storm that ravages the coastline. Hannibal has sensed it coming for a while, and while he considers himself braced, he does not consider himself ready.

He does not feel any hesitation. Hesitation is a product of doubt and indecision, and he is suffering from neither. But they are entering into a very dangerous situation with a less-than-stellar plan. Of course, Will in his very nature is not entirely predictable. There is a monster inside of him that may come out with just the wrong kind of provocation. There will be casualties.

If Mason Verger falls, Hannibal will consider it a success. He thinks Will might as well, but just as he warned Will about the consequences of knowledge, so too must he be prepared for the fact that Will may react badly to the idea of casualties. The dream in which Margot and Hannibal's metaphorical personifications got hurt distressed him deeply; if a similar thing were to happen now, Hannibal has no doubt he would react in a similar way.

There is a piece of his mind that is touching Will's shadow. As they approach the Verger estate, the shadow darkens and thickens, forming walls. Hannibal presses his lips together. "What are you doing?" he asks. In the recesses of his mind, the Palermo is forming gates, high towers and walls.

"Fortifying your mind," comes Will reply, distant like he's calling through fog. "The sisters are mind readers, Doctor Lecter. We cannot let them see your intentions."

Hannibal nods to himself, the headlights of his car illuminating the large gate with the normal security guard. The man greets him with a smile, both surprised and pleased, and opens the gate for him with a warm 'Welcome back, Doctor Lecter'. Hannibal drives up the long roadway to the main house.

"They keep the cars near the stables," Hannibal tells Will, pushing the words across their bond instead of speaking them aloud. "The containment units for mutants are nearby, through an entrance that leads to the cellar, which then goes to the bidding rooms, I believe. You'll have to make your way in through there."

He feels a flicker of acknowledgement from Will, and sighs. He would have liked to have more time to practice, but time is the one thing they cannot afford to waste. If Bedelia's connection to the Vergers is as intimate as Hannibal suspects, she may have already told Mason that they will be coming, that Hannibal is asking too many questions about Will.

He brings the car to a stop outside of the front steps and turns off the engine, leaving his keys inside. He steps out of the car, fastening his suit jacket, and smiles when Ichi approaches him as she always does. "Good evening, Doctor Lecter!" she chirps, gesturing for him to follow her inside. Hannibal resists the urge to look back at his car as Ni gets into the driver seat to park it with the rest. "This is a welcome surprise. Your presence has been sorely missed."

"I've been gone scarcely more than a month," Hannibal replies mildly as he's led into the normal grand foyer. Everything looks much the same – the servants and mutants offering champagne and food, the table lining the edge of the room with the lots of the evening, the well-dressed guests in their various clusters.

Ichi smiles. "Still," she replies. "We were beginning to think you'd grown bored of us."

"I could never," Hannibal says. He spies Margot in conversation with a man, whose back is turned to him. He accepts a glass of champagne and Ichi leaves to go back outside and greet other guests, and Hannibal approaches Margot and the man.

"Doctor Lecter!" Margot says, stopping mid-sentence with her eyes wide as she spots him. The man turns. He's tall, his hair cropped short, and Hannibal pauses. The man's face is familiar – Hannibal recognizes it from the sketch that Miss Jameson gave. He will admit her artistic skills give an incredible likeness, down to the precise angle of the scar on his mouth.

Hannibal smiles, clinking his glass to Margot's. She's not drinking champagne like the other guests, he notices, but a clear drink that smells like gin. "It's good to see you, Margot," he says. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"Of course not! Let me introduce Mister Francis Dolarhyde. He's a new friend of my brother's, and wanted to come by and see the wares we had to offer."

"Pleasure," Francis says. Hannibal smiles at him, and wonders what kind of things this man might have done that Will had killed his mutant over. The man he and Will had killed and eaten had been meant to purchase her, and Hannibal wouldn't put it past Mason to offer Francis an invitation to the auction for compensation.

"Good to meet you," Hannibal says, lifting his glass in greeting before taking a sip of the sweet, crisp champagne. He can feel Will's presence like static in the back of his head, a ringing in his ears that is almost ignorable unless he pays attention to it. Will isn't on the move yet; he won't be until he's sure it's safe, once the first bids start.

"If you'll excuse me," Francis says after a moment of silence, ducking his head and giving Margot a tight smile, before he disappears amongst the crowd. Hannibal sighs, and turns his attention to Margot, reaching out to cup her arm and give her a kiss on the cheek in greeting.

"A man of few words," he notes.

Margot's eyes flash with mirth and she smiles, childish and wide. "Yes," she replies. Then, she clears her throat, and leans in closer so their words can be softer and less likely to be overheard. "How have you been? How is Will?"

"Both of us are well," he says with a smile. "How are you? And Alana?"

Margot blinks at him, and her pink cheeks darken. She bites her lower lip and cups her glass with both hands, scuffing one heel in a childish move. "Ah, good," she says, her voice soft with affection at the mention of Alana. "I really appreciate you introducing me to her. I like her a lot. She's meant to be coming here tonight, actually."

Hannibal blinks. "Surprising," he says. "She doesn't think terribly highly of the mutant trade."

"I know," Margot says lightly, a thread of guilt in her voice. Hannibal is sure she would rather stop the auctions herself, but Margot is as much at the whims of her brother as any of his creatures. She sighs. "But she understands, circumstances don't always let us do what we want, or what we feel is right."

"Hopefully those circumstances change very soon," Hannibal says.

Margot's eyes rise to his, and she frowns.

"Has she arrived yet?" Hannibal asks.

Margot shakes her head. "She likely won't come until the crowd thins out," she replies with a shrug.

"Probably for the best," Hannibal says mildly. He tilts his head, tugging on the little thread connecting him to Will's mind, and sees a ghostly flash of the Palermo in front of him. "Alana will be here, darling," he tells Will in his mind's eye.

He can feel Will's presence, red sharpening and turning purple with worry.

"We must act quickly, then," he replies in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Perhaps you could tell Mason I'm here?" Hannibal asks. "I would like to speak to him regarding Will's medical records. There are still some questions I believe they would be able to answer."

"Of course," Margot says. There's no suspicion or worry in her voice or her eyes. Hannibal wonders if Bedelia told her what Hannibal has done, what he knows. If she told either of the siblings, and Mason is hiding it from her, or if he even knows himself.

She smiles and parts from him, and Hannibal meanders over to the table of lot numbers to pass the time. "There's another thing," Hannibal tells Will silently; "The man you saw, whose mutant you killed. With the facial scar. He's here too."

Will's red shivers, flexing its claws. Righteous anger passes through their bond and Hannibal smiles, perusing the list of lots without reading them.

"Anything strike your fancy?"

Hannibal looks up, seeing Francis at his side. He shrugs one shoulder and takes another sip of wine. "I'll confess, I'm mostly here for the company," he replies. "I purchased a mutant from the Vergers several weeks ago and I'm not sure I could host another at this time."

Francis smiles, showing his upper teeth. "If I could, I'd have as many as could fit in my house," he replies. Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "I like solitude, but the way they look at the world is so…inspiring."

Hannibal nods. "Have you owned one before?" he asks.

Francis nods. "Yes. Unfortunately, I lost her."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Francis nods again, and Hannibal pauses. Then; "What was her power?"

"Recollection," Francis says, his voice going soft. "She could take any memory of something she'd seen and replay it like it was happening for the first time. She held many a treasured memory for me."

Hannibal smiles.

"What about yours?"

"Protection," Hannibal says. "Amongst other things."

Francis frowns, blinking at Hannibal. "Other things," he repeats.

Hannibal nods. "Will possesses a remarkable ability to tell stories," he says. "They're very entertaining."

"Will." Francis blinks, then his eyes widen in recognition. "You bought Will."

"You've heard of him?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head to one side.

"Mason raves about him. Calls him his pride and joy. Says he could manipulate the rattle from a snake, that he can look at someone and understand them, and from there, make them do whatever he wanted them to do."

Hannibal nods to himself. Well, he supposes that much is true. He would be incredibly naïve to think otherwise.

"I'm sure you don't need me to tell you this, but I would watch my back around a creature like that," Francis adds. "One can never be sure of the loyalty of a creature that can literally be and say anything it thinks you want."

"I appreciate your concern," Hannibal says mildly, stepping away from the table. Francis follows him, apparently much chattier without Margot to chaperone. "Tell me, Mister Dolarhyde, what are you in the market for, here?"

Francis gives him another bare-toothed smile. "I suppose I won't know until I see it."

Hannibal blinks at him, but before he can reply, he hears Mason's voice ringing out, bringing an instant quiet to those gathered. Hannibal looks up to see him standing at the top of the stairs leading to the rest of the house, Margot at his side.

"My friends!" he crows, holding his arms out to either side of him like he's about to introduce the greatest wonder the world has ever seen. In his head, Hannibal feels Will reacting to the sound of his voice. His fangs bare, Hannibal feels cool air touch his face as Will gets out of the trunk of his car, prowling through the darkness. Will's mind has a strange edge of impatience and anger to it. Hannibal bites his lip and resists the urge to warn him to be careful. He cannot afford to not be paying attention. "Thank you all for coming tonight. Each and every one of you is special. You are special because you have been invited here, and I hope to see everyone in this room satisfied."

His eyes rake over the crowd, land on Hannibal, and his smile widens. Hannibal has never seen Mason give a speech before the auction in all his years of attendance. The small knot of concern sitting in the base of his spine starts to grow.

"We will be doing things a little differently tonight," Mason adds, clapping his hands together twice. At the sound, the large doors leading to the bidding chamber open, and Hannibal sees as all of the sisters except Ichi start to file out. In their wake come almost a dozen creatures. They have collars and masks over their faces just like Will did when Hannibal first purchased him, and the crowd parts as they make their way to the bottom of the steps and come to a halt in a line facing the crowd.

"As I said, each of you are special, dear friends to me," Mason continues, his smile wide as a shark. Margot's eyes are wide and scared, though she's trying not to look it – either she didn't know what was going on, or she knows exactly what is about to happen.

And she'd said Alana would be coming later, after the crowds thin out.

Hannibal swallows and sets his wine glass down.

"There is one thing that makes you all just that little bit *extra,"* Mason says, and snaps his fingers. The five sisters start to undo the masks and collars on the mutants and Hannibal's fingers curl. He sees movement and looks over his shoulder, seeing that Ichi and the guard at the gate are standing in front of the closed front doors. Their posture is non-threatening enough, but Hannibal knows what it looks like when someone is gearing up for a frenzy. "Namely being the precise kind of friends, as you have all been to me. And Margot."

At the sound of her name, Margot stiffens, looking at her brother. He grins at her and she presses her lips together, bowing her head. Her eyes find Hannibal's, wide and shining with apology, and she swallows and takes a step forward, holding her hands behind her back.

"Each of the mutants you see in front of you have been trained to kill without hesitation," she says. Hannibal looks down the line of them. None of them appear particularly threatening, but then again, if Will had been standing just as they were when Hannibal first saw him, he could have easily assumed the same. "They have each been given a command to kill and feast as they would like." At her words, the five sisters take their places behind the mutants, forming a barricade between them and the Vergers. "Those that survive will be granted one of these specially trained mutants free of charge."

A surprised murmur spreads throughout the crowd. Verger guests are not permitted weapons within the walls, and are searched before being allowed to enter. Hannibal has never been searched due to his close connection to the family, but he realizes the mistake he's made. He had relied entirely on Will being able to fight his way close enough to Mason to kill him. He hadn't thought far enough ahead to bring a weapon of his own.

"Here's where it gets interesting, my friends," Mason says, smiling. "Friendship with Margot and me comes at a cost. The cost is you must prove your worth. These mutants are blind." Another shocked series of murmurs spreads throughout the crowd. Hannibal smiles. "Play your cards right and you might survive long enough to see yourself rewarded. I can only afford to have the very best of the best as my friends, you understand."

"You crazy son of a bitch!" someone yells from the crowd. At the sound of his voice, the first mutant's head snaps up, he bares sharp fangs – elongated at the canines like those of a jungle cat – and the mutant lunges at the speaker. The crowd parts with cries of alarm and Hannibal's smile widens when he hears a scream break off into a choking burble. It's a sound he knows intimately – when someone gets their throat cut.

Or, in this case, ripped out.

The mutant stands, snarling, and the second one clicks his tongue. The mutant walks back to stand in line, his face and chest red and shining with blood.

"Will," Hannibal says silently, pushing his thoughts towards the haze of red at the corner of his mind. "We may have a problem."

"I've been listening," comes Will's reply. "I won't fail you."

"Be careful, darling."

Will's consciousness brushes along Hannibal's, intimate and warm, before it fades.

Mason smiles, manic and proud, and pulls a whistle from his pocket, much like the one Hannibal owned. He should have brought his own – perhaps it would have proven advantageous. Again, he curses his own half-cocked plan. Will has proven to be an impatient influence on him.

"Let the games begin!" Mason crows, and blows harshly through the whistle.

As Hannibal suspected they would, the crowd bursts into a frenzied rush. He sighs through his nose and steps back as Francis runs away from him, and leans against the edges of the lot

table, taking his champagne back in hand. The pool of blood from the first dead man is making the floor slick, spreading out all around those others gathered. Glasses crash to the floor, someone screams, and the mutants attack.

They are savage beasts, Hannibal cannot deny that. Clearly whatever predatory instinct that Mason had cultivated in Will, he has perfected his design. None of them change shape – they are merely clawed and fanged men and women, operating on sound alone to whittle down their prey.

Hannibal watches as one woman's neck snaps and she falls, her stomach raked open and the mutant who killed her feasting on her intestines. Cannibals, the lot of them. They're probably starving. Hannibal takes a sip of his champagne and sees a mutant lift his head, breathing in deeply, its head cocked in his direction.

Hannibal smiles, and throws the glass towards where Dolarhyde fled. The mutant snarls and lunges past him, blood and sweat thick in his scent as he passes Hannibal without a second of hesitation.

Several of the guests fall quickly. Those that are smarter find weapons in shattered glass, in chairs, in the serving trays. Servants and other mutants under Mason's care are not given any special treatment. It seems only the sisters, Mason, and Margot are safe within their wall of silence.

Hannibal raises his eyes and meets Margot's. They're filled with tears, and he gives her a nod of acceptance. She presses her lips together, covering her mouth to hide her sob, and turns her face away.

"Mason! Please!" A man has found his way to the bottom of the steps, clutching his shredded arm. As soon as he speaks, one of the mutants is on him, launching herself onto his back to send him crashing onto the stairs hard enough to split his skull.

As strange a sight as it is, it's all Hannibal can do not to mourn the loss of so much good meat.

Hannibal looks away from the fallen man to see Francis plunging the sharp end of a broken champagne glass into one of the mutant's necks. It growls at him, clawing at his chest, and Francis pulls it back and stabs into the creature's neck again with a low grunt, slashing at its neck until he finds the artery and is bathed in a pool of its blood. The mutant falls and Francis wipes a hand over his face, and lifts his head to glare at Mason.

Mason looks upon the scene like a general watching a battle being won. He's so *proud*, secure up on his pedestal and overlooking the wrath and ruin below him. Hannibal imagines this is as close as the man will come to feeling like a God.

Then, something happens. The crowd is much thinner, bodies and blood littering the floor as the mutants eat and devour their fill. But Hannibal senses something, in the same way one might feel a change in the seasons when the leaves start turning brown.

He realizes what it is when a man, drenched in blood, prowls up behind a mutant and snaps its neck in a short jerking motion. The mutant falls over the body of a spluttering man, barely clinging to life. Hannibal smiles.

"Hello, Will."

With all the mutants gathered in the main foyer, and the guests and Vergers obviously occupied, Will's path must have been clear. Will looks *beautiful*. His eyes are completely black, completely lost to the predator burrowing under his skin and clawing its way to the surface. His skin shines with blood, both that of people and mutants, and Hannibal can see where his own black ooze is staining his clothes from a clawed wound in his chest.

Hannibal looks back up at Mason. He wants to see the man's face when he realizes what is happening.

It comes after Will has killed his third mutant. People are attacking him as well, but Will is showing none of the mercy and love he holds for Hannibal. He kills without remorse, without favoritism. He rips out a man's throat in one action and wraps his hands around a mutant's neck in another. Hannibal sighs, opening his mind to feel Will's rage, his wrath. Will's mind is no longer gold, or red, but black; a pure void of entropic killer instinct that is so intensely beautiful that Hannibal, for a moment, is rendered breathless.

Mason barks out a sharp order. "Ni, San!" He points to Will. "Kill him."

The sisters spring into action, leaving their posts so that only three of the sisters remain guarding Mason and Margot. Hannibal straightens up, seeing a potential opportunity.

"Be careful, darling," he tells Will. "The sisters are coming for you."

Will's head snaps up, and he turns from his latest kill to bare his teeth at them as they part and circle him, low to the ground, beasts in their own right. They are trained in knives and poisons, Hannibal knows that. He can only hope that, if Will does get injured, his healing abilities will save him.

San lets out a wild shriek, running for Will, and Will catches her upraised arm, twists her wrist and breaks it over his shoulder before throwing her to one side. Ni is right behind her, and jumps onto Will's back, throwing him to the ground. Will snarls, rolling onto his back and punching her in the nose, sending her head back with a sharp crack. She hisses, her eyes flashing, and cups his face in her hands, her thumbs pressing down sharply on his eyelids in the hope of blinding him.

Will claws at her arms, raking his nails down her and opening her skin in thick red lines. Those hands, that were always so gentle and loving against Hannibal's flesh, have turned to weapons. San stands, holding her broken arm, and comes up to Will, a knife in her hand.

Ni sits forward, exposing Will's chest, and Will jerks his hips, rolling them sharply, and takes the knife in the back of his shoulder. He howls, and digs his claws into Ni's neck, until Hannibal knows he's reached bone. He jerks his hands sharply and she goes still, hands falling from his face.

Will's eyes are bleeding black, running down his face like tears. He staggers to his feet, his nose bleeding and red in his teeth, and yanks the knife from his shoulder, whirling on San.

"Shi," Mason growls, and another sister launches herself into the fight. "Go, Roku, fucking finish the job."

Hannibal smiles. Francis is the only guest left still standing, but he's cornered at the door by the last blind mutant, Ichi and the gate guard at his back. He looks over at Hannibal, a pitiful plea for aid in his eyes. He's still clutching the stem of the champagne glass.

Hannibal would applaud him, and would have even helped him just as a reward for his fighting spirit, but Hannibal's sights are on bigger game. He looks back up at Mason and Margot, deeming everyone else sufficiently distracted, and starts towards the stairs.

He hears Will howl in pain, and looks back at him as Will plunges his hand into Go's chest, ripping her heart out while it still beats. He has more wounds, Hannibal can feel the ache of them pulsing through Will's black psyche.

Then, Will roars, and Hannibal feels the bond tying them together abruptly snap. Hannibal pauses, suddenly off-kilter without the haze of Will's thoughts as his company. The fort around his mind falls as Will's jaws crack apart, the stag rearing up through his skin in a way much less controlled than Hannibal has ever seen it. The change is almost instantaneous, and the stag doesn't even bother to shed the remnants of Will's flesh from its hide before it's rearing up, head lowered, and skewers Roku where she stands. The stag bucks its head, sending her flying over its back. Her body hits the mutant cornering Francis and Francis uses the distraction to slit the last blind mutant's throat.

Will's wounds have not melted away with the appearance of the stag. Though the black blood blends perfectly with its fur and hair, Hannibal can see the shine of it, see the weakness in its foreleg from Will's stab wound in its shoulder, see the blood caked around its eyes. They're milky with damage and Hannibal swallows.

"Will," he says out loud, no longer needing to be quiet with the last blind mutant taken care of. The stag's ears flick towards him, and it turns its head. Hannibal nods towards Ichi, the gate guard, and Francis. "This isn't done yet."

The stag huffs. Its eyes go back to Mason, nostrils flaring, and it paws the ground, disturbing the bodies of the dead and dying. It parts its jaws, baring red fangs, and takes a step towards Mason.

"Will," Hannibal says, louder this time.

The stag looks at him again, before it bows its head, and turns around to face Francis, Ichi, and the gate guard.

Mason's face is a black mask of anger. "Francis," he calls, and Francis looks up. "Ichi and Cordell are your friends. Kill this beast and I will see you richly rewarded."

Francis scowls at him, but must deem the fight to be more than fair and definitely worth the promise of his life and reward, because he sets his eyes on Will with cold determination. Ichi and Cordell step into place beside him and the stag huffs, lowering its head in preparation to charge.

"Hannibal, my dear friend," Mason says, smiling. Hannibal looks up at him and Mason holds out a hand. "Why don't you come join us up here?"

Margot's face is wet with tears, her shoulders shaking. It looks like she can barely stand. At his hesitation, Mason's eyes flash, and he pulls out a knife and grabs Margot, holding her to his chest with the blade pressed to her throat. "I won't ask twice," he says coldly.

The stag lets out a low, wounded sound. Even though Hannibal can no longer feel Will, he knows what Will would say if he could speak.

Margot must not be harmed. That is the one consequence Will cannot live with.

Hannibal nods, and ascends the stairs, taking his spot beside Mason. As soon as he's in place, Ichi smiles, and she, Francis, and Cordell rush the stag all at once. Hannibal will admit, *now* he's worried. This entire night has gone sideways and then some. The blood is slick on the floor, the bodies will make it difficult to maneuver.

Cordell rushes Will's side and the stag bellows, lunging forward, but it's just an animal and doesn't have things like hands and extra limbs it can use to fight. Cordell wraps his hand around one of the stag's horns, grunting when a sharp spike finds his shoulder, and Francis plunges his weapon into Will's thick pelt. It's not long enough to do much damage, but Will is badly wounded, and then Ichi jumps onto the stag's back and she has longer knives of her own. She has one in each hand, and as the stag rears up, she plunges them both into either side of the stag's chest.

Hannibal takes a step forward, and stops when Mason tuts. "Ah, ah," he says, and his smile is wide when Hannibal looks at him. He has the knife pressed more tightly to Margot's neck. "No funny business, Doctor Lecter. I know you're smarter than that."

Yes, he is, but intelligence doesn't always matter when it comes into contact with insanity. The stag's pained groan draws his attention back, its forelegs buckle and Francis stabs one of its eyes with his champagne stem, earning another cry of pain.

Cordell growls, twists his hand, and Hannibal gasps when one of the stag's horns snaps just an inch shy of the hilt. He throws it away and Hannibal's heart is in his stomach, watching as Ichi continues to bring her knives down on the stag's flanks and haunches as it sinks to the ground.

Nothing could survive that.

He swallows back the thickness in his throat, realizing he is watching Will die right in front of his eyes. And there's not a damn thing he can do about it.

The stag collapses abruptly, blood pouring from its mouth and open wounds, and Ichi stands, wiping her blades off on her scrubs. Then, she looks at Mason, and Mason smiles and gives her a nod.

She flicks the excess blood off her knives – black blood, *Will's* blood, and rounds on Francis. Francis' eyes widen and he takes a step back as she advances on him.

"I thought we had a deal!" he yells to Mason.

"Oh, did you?" Mason replies mildly. "That was foolish."

The clarity of realizing that one is about to die is something seldom achieved. Hannibal can see it plainly, as plainly as Will's battered body laying amidst the ruin and decay in front of him. Ichi will kill Francis, and then Mason will kill him, and maybe even Margot if his proclivities stretch far enough. Hannibal hopes Alana is far, far away.

He pauses. *Alana*.

Hannibal sinks his hands into his pockets, unnoticed by Mason as he watches the ongoing fight with rapt fascination. Hannibal unlocks his phone, presses the bottom left of the screen where he knows the contact icon is, and taps twice. He only has one contact under the letter 'A'.

Touch texting through one's pocket isn't the most reliable thing, but he hopes that his muscle memory serves well enough to get the gist across. He swipes his thumb across his screen until he's sure he's gotten the best message he can without looking, and then taps the screen until he hears the *almost* silent 'whoosh' sound of the text message being sent.

Francis has taken a stab wound to the stomach, a heavy blow across his face courtesy of Cordell, and he's on his knees in front of Ichi, her blade tilted under his throat. He's breathing heavily, his eyes wild and dark.

"Cordell," Mason calls, deeming the fight to be handled sufficiently. "Come here. Take Margot someplace safe."

Cordell nods, and walks away from the fight. Past Will's hindlegs, his flank which has gone still and unmoving. Hannibal swallows.

Then, he sees the stag's ear twitch, and as Cordell passes its open maw, the stag rears up and sinks its teeth into his thigh. The animal's bite is large enough to instantly sever the femoral artery and Cordell cries out as the stag hauls itself to its feet, ripping his leg almost completely off his body. Cordell falls in a fountain of blood, clutching his leg in vain to stop the bleeding.

Hannibal doesn't think he's ever been more proud or relieved in his life.

Mason lets out a cry of alarm and anger as the stag lets go of Cordell and turns its attention to Ichi, and then Margot elbows him sharply in the stomach, causing him to huff and bend over,

clutching at his chest. She flees from his arms and towards Hannibal, circling behind him. There's a cut on her neck, but it isn't deep.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers. "I'm so sorry."

"Call Alana," Hannibal says, handing her his phone. He unlocks it and she takes it with shaking hands.

She frowns. "You texted her?" she asks.

"As well as I could."

"She says she's on her way. She's bringing backup."

"Good," Hannibal says. "Make sure I'm long gone when she gets here."

Then, he turns his attention to Mason. Mason snarls at him, his eyes wild, and he holds the knife out to Hannibal in warning. "Careful now," he says. "We wouldn't want to do anything rash."

Hannibal hums. In this instant, his mind has never been clearer. "You're right," he says.

He moves quickly. Mason might have a knife but he's no fighter – he lives through his fear and his power. Mason slashes at Hannibal wildly, catching the side of his hip, and Hannibal growls. He grabs Mason's hand and twists the knife out of his grip, turning it in his hand and slashing upwards in an effort to catch Mason's neck. Mason jumps back, his eyes wide, and he flails backwards. Hannibal follows, stalking forward, a predator just as much as Will or any of Mason's other mutants are.

A cry catches his attention, and Hannibal turns to see Francis fall to Ichi, one swing of her long knife cutting halfway through his neck. He falls and Ichi turns to Hannibal, her hair flying around her face. She bares her teeth and runs at him, ready to defend her master.

The stag has collapsed again, unmoving. It's not a stag anymore, though, but Will. His skull is caked in blood, his head turned away, so Hannibal cannot see his broken face or his skewered eye. His naked body bears terrible wounds from Ichi's knives, soaking him in his black blood. But Hannibal refuses to believe that Will is dead. He can't – not yet.

Ichi lunges for him with a shriek, stabbing one of her knives through Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal grunts, grabbing her hair and throwing her back. She rolls onto her feet, her last knife held in both hands, long enough to be considered a sword.

"You don't have to do this," Hannibal tells her, circling her slowly.

Her mouth quirks, and she doesn't answer. She straightens up, and Hannibal sees her eyes go black.

She rushes at him, and then rushes *past* him, falling onto Mason with another sharp cry. Mason screams, his eyes wide and blood rushing through his mouth as Ichi thrusts her sword through his heart and up, spearing him into place. He falls and she follows, shoving the

sword with so much force that the tip embeds itself into the wood of the stairs below him. Mason chokes, clutching weakly at the sword in his chest, and Ichi smiles.

She leans down, cups his face, and kisses him on the forehead. It's a familiar, intimate gesture. Then, she stands, and yanks the sword back. Blood wells up around the open wound and Mason cries out, rolling down the stairs in a series of heavy thumps until he joins the rest of the bodies below, no more notable except for the fresh redness of his blood.

Ichi straightens, and turns to look at Hannibal. She flicks the blood off her sword and that's when Hannibal sees it. There's a series of wounds in her chest, bleeding heavily enough to have punctured her lung and speared her heart. She shouldn't be standing. He looks back at Will, and wonders if Will managed to get to her before he fell.

She chokes, and the black fades from her eyes. She drops her sword and falls to her knees, and Hannibal walks towards her, kneeling down and cupping her face.

As soon as he does, Will's mind slams into his, as strong as it always has. She smiles at him and cups his jaw with shaking hands. "I told you I wouldn't fail you," she says, and Hannibal hears Will's voice echoing the same.

Then, she collapses, her last breath leaving her small body, and Hannibal lets her go.

He stands, the weight of the night hitting him like the clouds sit on Altas' shoulders. He lets out a shaky breath, and his attention is caught when he hears Margot sobbing.

She's on her knees, her shaking hands clutching at her throat like she's choking. She looks up at Hannibal as he regards her, her eyes wide with terror. As though Hannibal might blame her for all that has happened.

He might. He should. She could have warned him.

"Is Alana on her way?" he asks.

She nods. "You have time."

Hannibal nods. Then, he rushes down the stairs and towards Will, falling to his knees at Will's side. He puts the back of his hand against Will's mouth, swallowing at the sight of him. His temple looks caved in from the loss of his antler, his eye is swollen completely closed but Hannibal knows that the ball of it has been split by Francis' weapon. His chest and flanks are open and bared enough for Hannibal to see bone and organs.

He rolls Will onto his side and Will makes a very small, very weak sound, and Hannibal lets out a sob of relief. He cradles Will's head and lifts him into his lap, holding him tightly as the blood seeps into his clothes.

"You're alright," he murmurs against Will's forehead, and wonders if he's trying to comfort Will or himself more. "Stay with me."

He can't feel Will in his head anymore. The last of his strength had gone into overpowering Ichi. Hannibal closes his eyes and hopes to whatever higher power there might be that Will

finds it in himself to survive.

"You did it, darling," he says, pushing Will's hair back from his face. "He's dead."

Will doesn't react. Hannibal almost expected him to.

"Forgive me," Hannibal whispers, and kisses Will's forehead. "There's one more thing I have to do."

He lays Will on his back, finds an open wound on his stomach, and plunges his hand inside. Will's body is still warm, his organs slick, and Hannibal grits his teeth, his other hand on Will's chest to measure to hummingbird flutter of his heart.

He finds it soon enough, now that he knows where it is. He digs his nails behind the tracking chip and hauls it out. If Will is going to die, he's going to die a free man.

He sheds his coat and wraps Will in it and hauls him up into his arms. Will feels so light, comically so, like he might be nothing more than light and color in Hannibal's arms. Hannibal looks back up at Margot. She's so far away, and yet so close.

"You should know," he tells her, "the only reason I'm sparing you now is because Will asked it of me. If he dies, I will be held to no such oath."

She swallows, and nods, once.

"I would take your son and leave as soon as you are able. This is my final gift to you. Use it wisely."

Then, he turns, and carries Will out of the front doors, down the steps, towards the stables. He puts Will in the passenger seat of his car, forcing himself to build his own fort around his mind. He cannot let himself worry for Will, will not allow himself to think of him as dead until his body turns cold and his heart stops. Will is a fighter, and Will loves him. He will fight to stay alive for Hannibal's sake.

Hannibal pets a hand through his hair, kisses his forehead one more time, and gets in the car. He speeds through the gate and down the road, towards the highway. The horizon lights up in red and blue as he turns away from the Verger estate, and then he stops looking back.

He takes Will to his home and carries him inside, laying him out in his nest. He cleans Will gently with warm water and towels, sews his wounds shut, cleans his eye and binds his injuries as best he can. Through it all, Will is pale, his breathing incredibly slow and shallow, but he's alive.

He realizes as he's doing it that he left his phone with Margot. But he does not believe she will turn on him. She owes him her life, as far as Hannibal is concerned. Hannibal's mercy will not last forever, especially if Will doesn't make it. She would be smart to claim it was all

a freak game of her brother's – which was true – and that Hannibal and Will were not involved. There's so much mutant and human blood that Hannibal doubts they will know to look for him, or that they would think to. Margot will hide his phone, lie to Alana and the police if she must, and Will and Hannibal will be safe.

He has to believe that. If not, well, who says the reckoning that befell her brother is not equally deserved? Those that bear witness to injustices are just as guilty, in the same way Hannibal knows he would wear the same stain of sin as the men who killed Mischa had he not done anything to bring them judgement.

He hooks Will up to an IV for fluids and nutrients, and a second one from his supply of his own blood that he has harvested over the years for circumstances much like this one. He's not sure Will's body could make use of it, but to have Will die of exsanguination after everything feels…like an insult. An unforgiveable one.

He sews up and bandages his own stab wound once he has Will as stable as he can manage. Then, he sits by Will's side. If Will dies in the night, Hannibal will not let him die alone. He holds Will's hand, aching for the familiar flicker of red and gold that is his mental presence. Hannibal has never minded being alone, but now he is lonely. He is starting to realize that his life with Will, however small a timestamp it is in his many years, has changed him irreparably. There is nothing after this – just as Will said there would be nothing if Hannibal were to ever send him away.

"I don't want there to be an after," he'd said. Hannibal is starting to understand what he means.

"Stay with me, darling," Hannibal whispers to him, kissing his bruised knuckles. He sighs, cupping Will's hand with both of his own, and bows his head. "Don't leave."

Alana visits him on Tuesday. It is the first time Hannibal has left Will's room since the auction. He hasn't slept or eaten, and he's sure he looks more than a little worse for wear, but he forces himself to part from Will's side to answer the door.

She looks drawn, exhausted, and worried all at once. Hannibal lets her inside without a word, too tired and too aching to bother with pleasantries. He's behaving rudely, but he thinks it is a justified rudeness.

"There was a massacre at the Verger estate during their auction," she tells him, taking a seat at his table. Hannibal offers her a glass of her beer and she takes it, but doesn't drink. He sits at the head of the table.

"A massacre?" Hannibal repeats.

Alana nods. "Apparently Mason had trained this whole new batch of mutants and decided he was going to let their masters fight for them, *Hunger Games* style," she says. "Margot was

the only survivor." Her eyes are a void of those echoes, enough blood and death for a lifetime. "Jack wants Will to come read the scene."

"No," Hannibal says.

She looks up, eyebrows raised. "No?"

Hannibal nods. "No," he says again. "Not this time."

Alana presses her lips together, considering him for a long time. "There was black blood at the crime scene, Hannibal," she says. "I only know one creature who bleeds like that."

"Ask me your questions, Alana."

She swallows. "You texted me before Margot called me, that night," she says. "Told me – I think you were telling me to bring a gun. Couldn't be sure."

"I couldn't look at my phone at the time."

"Why were you there, Hannibal?" Alana asks.

Hannibal sighs through his nose. "To kill Mason Verger."

Alana blinks at him. "Well, you got your wish." Hannibal nods. "Margot told me what you did for her. What you said to her. Her son was born last night. You have nothing to fear from her."

"Just from her?" Hannibal says.

Alana pauses, and finally takes a drink of her beer. "You should leave the country."

"I will," Hannibal replies. "Once Will is recovered. He might die. He might have died in the seconds I've been away from him." Alana's eyes widen, her expression changing to that fierce, maternal worry. "I need time."

"We can buy you time," Alana says. "Margot has connections, and safe houses."

"So do I," Hannibal replies, "but I don't need to go into hiding if no one implicates me."

Alana meets his eyes, before she nods. "You're right." She takes another drink. "I'll be blind. For you. For Will. For Margot."

"Thank you."

"I want you to take care of him, Hannibal," she continues, like an afterthought. Her eyes are bright with tears Hannibal knows she won't let herself shed. "I know you will, but I still have to say it. I want to know he's safe, and happy, and loved."

"All three, in excess," Hannibal replies. "We will go to Florence. You may visit us there whenever you wish, provided you don't bring Jack to our doorstep."

"I won't." She sits back, and huffs a shaken, strangled laugh. She sighs. "Can I see him?"

Hannibal nods, and stands. He leads the way up to Will's nest, opening the door and allowing her inside. She gasps, a hand going to her throat when she sees his broken, beaten body. The tears start to fall, then.

"I couldn't protect him," Hannibal murmurs. She looks at him, but Hannibal's eyes are on Will's face. "I confess I didn't really try. I behaved impulsively, just as I did when I agreed to buy him, when I agreed to this whole thing." He sighs. "But if I hadn't, you might have counted me amongst the dead. He defended me to his last."

"Don't talk like he's gone," Alana replies. "He's not dead yet."

"I know."

"I can stay with you, if you'd like."

Hannibal considers it, before he shakes his head. "I think I'd rather be alone."

Alana nods, face soft with understanding. She reaches out and puts a hand on his arm, and Hannibal finally turns his gaze away from Will to meet hers. "As one final favor to me," she says, and Hannibal tilts his head to one side, "let me see him one last time, before you go?"

Hannibal nods. "If circumstances allow," he replies.

She smiles, weak and tight, and kisses him on the cheek. She leaves the room, and Hannibal doesn't follow. He hears the front door closing and falls to his knees at Will's side, taking Will's hand in another gentle grip.

Then, he climbs into the nest beside Will, petting his hair back from his face. "You are so loved, darling," he murmurs. How incredible it must be to be a creature for fascinating, that brings joy and delight to all he touches.

Hannibal finally has to eat. There's not much left in his pantry since he had fed Will most of his stores before the planned assault, and he has no desire to go hunting to gather more supplies. If he has his way, they won't be here for that much longer anyway.

He eats plainly and settles in his study, a fire lit and a glass of wine sitting empty next to him. The fire feels dull against his skin, the golden glow of its light pales in comparison to Will's. He thinks of his study, the one Will had conjured in his mind, and closes his eyes.

It's pristine, no longer in the disarray it had been when Hannibal used his whistle on Will last. Hannibal thinks back to the night with Mason. He hadn't used the whistle on Will – he hadn't thought he needed to. Will had been overwhelmed from the fighting by itself without that psychological torture. Another cruelty Hannibal forced on him that turned out to be needless.

He opens his eyes, and goes to the patio. The whistle is still on the ground, undisturbed. Hannibal sighs and picks it up, sitting on the cold iron chair on which Will's white pelt is sitting. He wraps it around his shoulders and idly runs the whistle back and forth across his palm.

He thinks to the night in the bath, where the whistle had turned from painful to pleasurable for Will. Or it could have, if Hannibal hadn't been so cruel to him. He could have trained Will to delight in the sound, to anticipate it and adore it, knowing that his pleasure was in Hannibal's hands.

Will deserves nothing but gentleness now. If he survives, Hannibal will make sure every day remaining to them both is filled with sun, with gold, with laughter. He will break Will apart with joy and fill him with the liquid light of happiness and satisfaction. He will share his bed with Will, share his home and his heart. Spoken into existence.

He sighs, and brings the whistle to his lips, blowing through it in a short, sharp note. He doesn't hear anything, doesn't feel a flicker of Will's consciousness at all. He sighs again and sets the whistle down, and brings the white pelt inside.

He falls asleep on his study couch, the pelt draped over his chest and legs like a blanket as the fire dies down.

In his dreams, he is in the front pew of the Palermo Cathedral. The grinning face of Death looks up at him, as though mocking him. Hannibal imagines Death is holding Will in his hands, dangling him from a web like a giant spider. The web of life, so easily severed.

Hannibal swallows, and then looks up when he hears the sound of hooves. He turns, his eyes widening. The shadow of a stag eclipses the entrance to the Cathedral, the light giving him nothing but a silhouette.

He stands, and the stag lowers its head, walking forward until the sun is not at such a harsh angle. The doors close behind it, and Hannibal swallows. The stag is white, pristine and radiant like diamond, and walks towards him, eyes the sparkling blue of crystal. The animal is completely unharmed, no wounds or blood on it to mar its beautiful white coat.

It walks up to Hannibal and Hannibal holds out his hands, cupping the animal's face. "Will?" he whispers, hardly daring to hope. Hope is what can kill a man when nothing else does. This could be nothing more than a fever dream.

The stag huffs, pressing its forehead against Hannibal's chest, and Hannibal bends his head to kiss between its horns. "Oh, Will," he says, holding the animal's head tightly as though if he lets even a little bit go, the entire vision will disappear.

"Hannibal."

Hannibal opens his eyes, gasping, and turns to see Will standing above Death's face. He's smiling, human, *whole*, and Hannibal runs to him, gathering him tightly in his arms. Will kisses him deeply, his hands in Hannibal's hair, his body arching close like nothing has happened, like they are still in Hannibal's bed before Hannibal first knew Will at his most intimate moments.

"Is this real?" Hannibal whispers.

Will smiles. "Come upstairs."

Hannibal jolts awake, throws the pelt off of him, and stumbles in his haste to rush up to Will's nest. He almost breaks the door in his hurry and falls to his knees at Will's side. "Will," he whispers. Will looks unchanged, still pale and sickly, sweat coating his face, but his head is turned to one side and it hadn't been before.

Hannibal takes Will's hand, raises it to his lips, and could weep with relief when he feels the *barest* hint of Will's presence flicker against his mind like the end of a cat's tail. Will's chest rises with an uncharacteristically large inhale, his eyelids flutter, and then open. The iris Francis stabbed is clouded over, but the eye itself looks like it's healing. Hannibal can barely breathe.

Will's lips twitch, and Hannibal's tight throat and burning eyes give way to tears. He lets out a shaky exhale, cupping Will's jaw gently, and presses a kiss to his forehead. "I feared you were lost," he whispers, his voice hoarse from disuse.

Will sighs, licking his lips. His hand tightens and lifts, unsteadily, jerking, and his knuckles touch Hannibal's jaw. "I'd never leave you," he replies, and Hannibal has never heard a sweeter sound than Will's voice in his mind, tired and strained but *there*.

"You reached for me," Hannibal says. "Without touch."

"I heard you calling for me," Will replies.

Hannibal's breath is unsteady, his heart pounding. Like an adrenaline rush but wilder, the force of his relief and joy could ignite a dead star. "It's done," he says. "Mason Verger is dead."

Will hums. "Ichi fell," he says. "I used her."

"I know."

Will's eyes close, too tired to stay open. "I'm hungry," he murmurs.

Hannibal can't help it – he laughs. It's borderline hysterical, but he doesn't care. Will makes him feel emotions too powerful to ignore or fight. "Then I shall feed you."

Will smiles, weakly. His eyes don't open again and his hand falls, catching one of Hannibal's and squeezing gently. "Stay with me."

"Where else would I go?"

Will's laugh is mental more than physical, wrapping around Hannibal's mind. "I heard talk of Florence," he says.

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "When you're recovered, I'll take you there."

Will opens his eyes once more, shining and blue and so lovely Hannibal could weep. He is crying, he can feel the tears of relieved joy running down his face. He leans in and rests his forehead against Will's, petting through his hair. "I'll take care of you," he vows, more intimate and solemn than any bride and groom on their wedding day. "You'll never want for anything."

"I don't want much," Will replies. He tilts his head up, brushing his nose against Hannibal's, before collapsing with another sigh. "Your love. Your loyalty. You."

"It's yours," Hannibal says.

Will smiles, and closes his eyes with another soft, contented sigh. "That's a good start."

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it! Thank you to everyone who came along for the ride with me and I hope you enjoyed this (long as fuck) chapter/finale. And yes, Will and Hannibal are happy and safe in Florence and Bedelia kept her damn mouth shut and the first time Will meets Morgan Verger he is pretty much an excited puppy the whole time and even lets Morgan ride on his back because reasons.

Have a great night!

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